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Ace-High Western Stories

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

JULY 1945

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by DELL RAYBURN

CAST YOUR VOTE IN BULLETS!
by RALPH YERGEN

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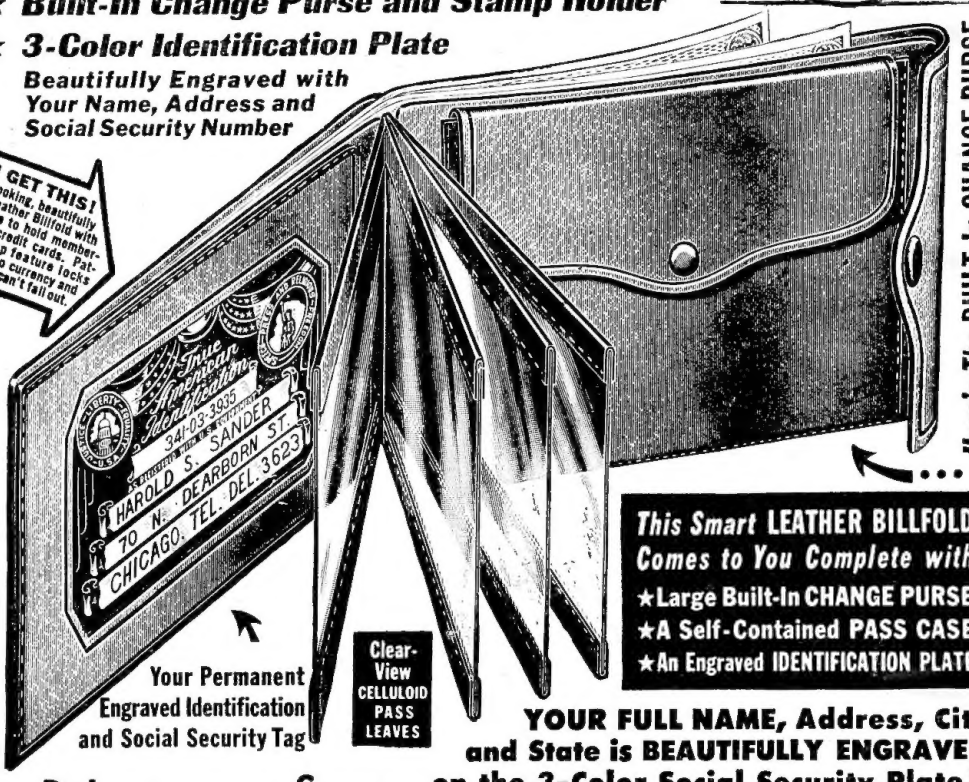

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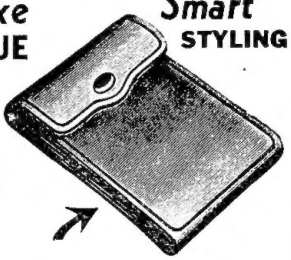

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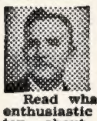

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Ace-High Western Stories

Vol. X, No. 1 CONTENTS July, 1945

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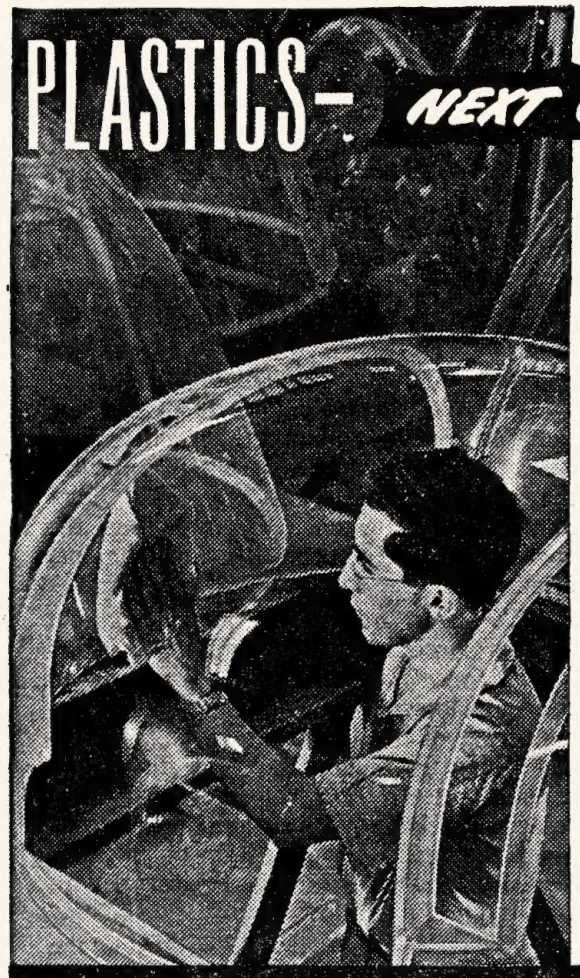

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All through that night as the restless dials tuned one station after another, there came the warm, sunlit music of "Home on the Range." The cowboy ballad-hymn was the President's favorite song, he had lightly told reporters many years ago. From then on, the song followed him everywhere and became more strongly a part of American folkmusic. It's a funny piece to be a sailor's favorite—for the Commander was essentially a sailor. Some who had gotten their come-uppance at his hands said it was a practical bid for Western votes. But it's not too hard to see that this man who had embattled for twelve years in the war against fascism sometimes thought longingly of the sweet peaceful country, "—where seldom is heard a discouraging word."

Home on the range. Just as every sailor wants a little shanty by the sea, every cowpoke wants a spread of his own. He wants to wait for his own Last Roundup rocking and smoking on the front porch of his ranch-house, watching the western sun blaze down over the Great Divide, on a range "—where the skies are not cloudy all day."

But it was a rare cowhand who spent his last days so tranquilly. Perhaps that was one reason those tough men of the old West tossed their lives away so lightly—they had nothing to hope for in their old age. When a man got too old to hit the saddle or throw a gun, he was really through. If he was lucky, he could get a job as a swamper in a saloon—a sour end for these proud prairie kings. If he was really lucky, he found an early berth in Boot Hill.

It lasted until 1929—that rough, tough, winner-take-all system that trampled down the Western wilderness and smeared a thin veneer of civilization over its cactus edges. In the mad scramble to the top of the heap, cowboys and laborers, farmers and craftsmen, mariners and storekeepers—the little fellows—were kicked aside into the backwash of poverty and want. By 1932, the whole land was black with despair and blind with terror, fumbling in the dark.

Then, like the warm breath of courage came a voice to counsel the stricken land: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," the newly elected President said. That phrase will long be remembered as the opening gun in democracy's battle against fascism.

With vigor and courage our chief fought for and succeeded in instituting provisions for the once forgotten man. The veteran cowhand knew that his diet no longer depended upon the whims of a careless society. His President had gone directly to his assistance with heretofore unheard of reform legislation. The common man was given the tools and opportunity to raise his head from despair and face the world with a new found pride.

In his second inaugural address the President summed it up: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have little."

Men will long remember his actions and foresight as he directed the nation in that dark hour when a powerful and ruthless barbarism threatened to overrun our civilization. The returning service men and women will be forever grateful that they had his wise guidance as Commander-in-Chief. A Chief who had directed them victoriously in war and planned for their future.

There are many who disagreed with some of his policies and actions, but all that must be laid aside—together we must take our place at the side of his successor. And dedicate ourselves to a peace that will reward our fallen leader's faith, and to a future "—where the skies are not cloudy all day."

"Oh, she's OLD! Almost thirty!"

At twenty, thirty seems ancient.

At thirty, forty is distant middle age.

At forty, well, it'll be a long time before you're fifty.

The point is that ten years *ahead* always seems like a long time. Yet, actually it passes "before you know it" . . . and you find yourself face to face with problems, opportunities, needs, that once seemed very far in the future.

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Down River to

CHAPTER ONE

The Wolf Pack Strikes

A LASHING, raging squall, common on the turbulent Missouri, drove Lynx Lesky and his little party from the river. They had seen it gathering all afternoon. However it broke before they anticipated it, almost swamping their big mackinaw and the trailing bull boat.

"Hell of a note!" Big Red O'hara roared, shaking his great, bristle-covered fist at the raging sky when at last they succeeded in fighting their way in and he stepped ashore. Lynx leaped into the water on the other side. Both of them were now drenched to the skin. Together they dragged the heavy boat to safety, high on the shore.

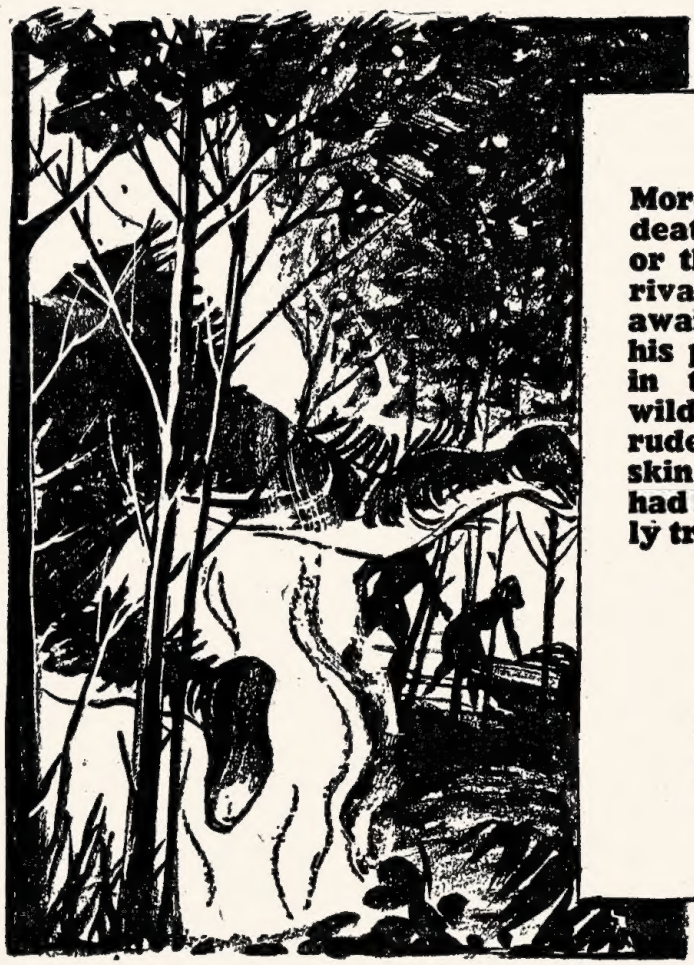
Little Doc Robin and Diana Livingstone then struggled out of the boat. They set to work immediately, rigging up a couple of lean-to shelters. They were finished by the time Lynx and Big Red had the boats concealed in the shore brush.

"The damned weather man's an imp out of hell and he's in cahoots with the damned renegades that's headed there," Big Red roared. "I'll lay odds it don't stop that blood thirsty Piegan Pete and his renegade band from riding in for a visit."

"Do you really think he's trailing us?" Little Doc piped. "Why should he?"

"Money without work—that's why," Lynx spoke up. "After that tight-fisted MacDougal offering him the price of five hundred prime beaver plews if he'd lift Diana, he'll figure the gal is still worth something even if MacDougal is dead."

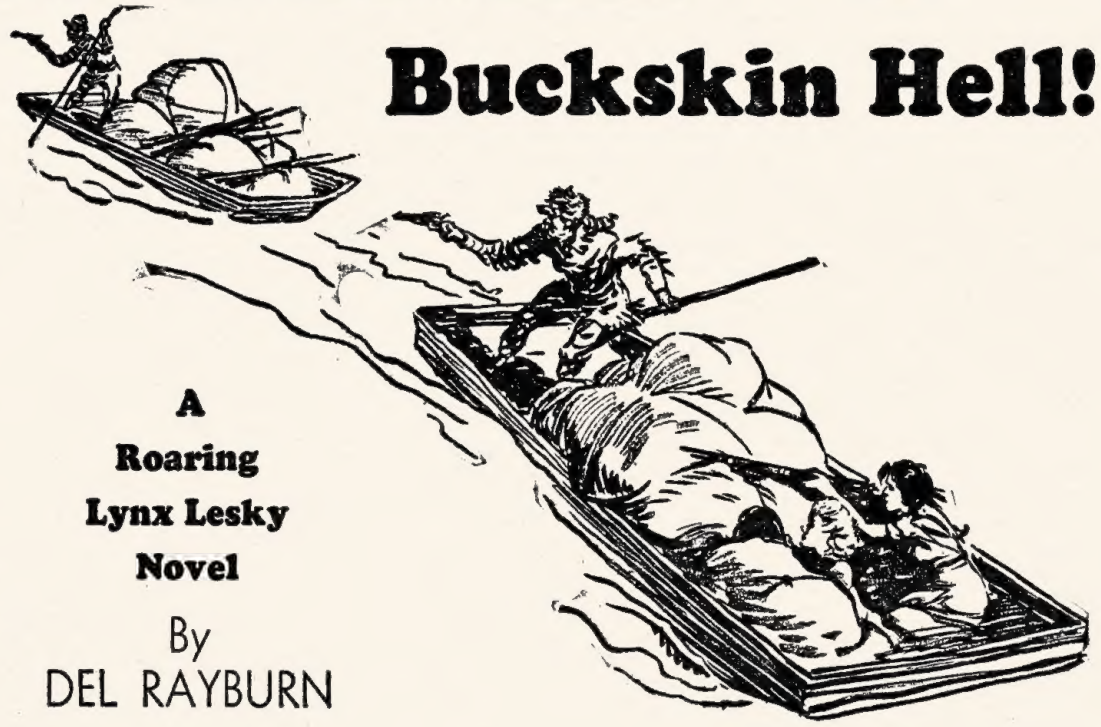
"He's back there, never worry," Big Red growled. "I ketched the glint of sunshine on gunmetal away back behind us before the



More than the winged death of savage arrows, or the hidden menace of rival trappers' guns were awaiting Lynx Lesky and his party. . . . For, deep in that Missouri River wilderness, stood the rude empire of a buckskin slave-master, who had baited well his deadly trap for the King of the Free Trappers!

Lynx hurtled directly at the renegade.

Down River to Buckskin Hell!



A Roaring Lynx Lesky Novel

By DEL RAYBURN

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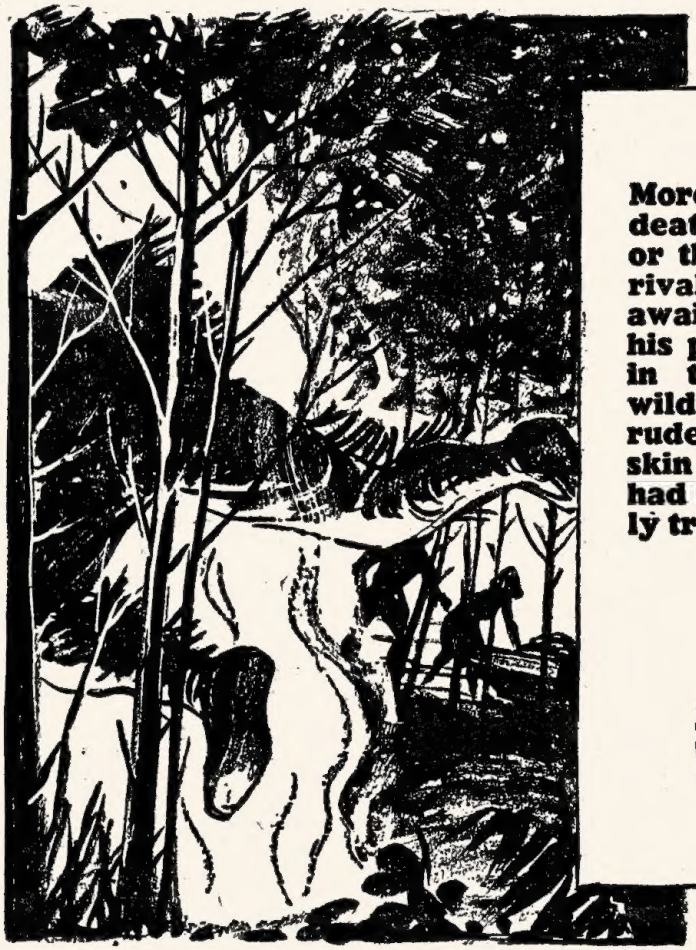

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Buckskin Hell!

A Roaring Lynx Lesky Novel

By DEL RAYBURN

clouds started gathering up this morning. He's staying hard on the gal's tracks figuring he can find out who wants her later. But old Beaver Ruck won't leave him wonder long, not if his controlling a hunk of rich new beaver country depends on whether he gets his bloody old claws on Diana or not."

"I wish—" Diana began. But Lynx cut her off.

"Don't you go wishing nothing. We ain't complaining, but we just as well face facts and know what we're up against."

"Well I still wish," Diana insisted, "that those prim little girls' schools Father wasted all that money getting me through, back East, had insisted on the development of more brain power and less on finish. He told me that unless a woman's face looked like a tired old sack she was no business out here, but I was just a spoiled finishing school brat and I—"

"Gosh the conceit of some folks," Lynx cut in. "She thinks she's good looking and that's the reason we're having all this trouble. Really it's the coming of law and order back yonder in Oregon Territory that's put the wolf on our trail, forcing Beaver Ruck to have her under his thumb before he can move in on her Dad's territory and hold it. Whether her face's like a tired old sack or not don't matter a particle."

"You're horrid," Diana declared matter-of-factly. "It's no joking matter, the terrible things that go on in this country. Sometimes I think the whites are worse than the redskin savages."

"Can't let a little blood bother you like that," Lynx jibed. "You'll likely see plenty more of it before we get to Saint Looey."

"A LITTLE blood, the brawny mountain man says," Diana scorned. "My father's blood to start with. Finally every last one of his trappers, except for our indestructable friend, Lesky. Not to mention more than twice that many Indians and white renegades that died having a try at us somewhere along the way. That's over fifty men. And we're little more than half way. I wish—"

"Hold on to your wishing, gal," Lynx cut in gently, his tone quietly earnest now. "All you say's true, but wishing don't do no good."

Big Red saw the conversation taking a serious twist and in his loudest voice boomed, "I'd give my interest in all the beaver we're hauling to be back in the mountains under a big fir tree. At least a man could have a fire and get dry. All this water's going to make my hide all crinkle up and get slimy like I was something that crawled out from under a rock."

Lynx was as wet as any of them and he realized how uncomfortable Diana must be, now that Big Red mentioned it. He knew, too, that it was her discomfort the giant redhead was thinking of and not his own. For spending a wet, cold night with no fire was no new experience for a mountain man. But she was too proud to mention the physical misery she must be enduring.

"I reckon that squaw-man renegade and his Piegan *coupe* hunters are far enough behind that we can risk a fire," Lynx decided. "At least until we dry out."

"I'd say any man that could find something dry enough to burn around here must be in league with the Devil," Little Doc Robin declared. "I know I couldn't."

"You scout around and find some wood big enough to be dry in the center," Lynx directed. "I'll build you a fire, and with no help from the Devil either. I've got a cache of kindling in the mackinaw, all dry and ready for just this kind of weather."

NIGHT closed in on them quickly as they broiled venison steaks over the small fire Lynx made. But Little Doc seemed to have little appetite.

Finally the little medico slipped out of the scanty shelter and disappeared into the blackness of the wet night. After his years of unending drunkenness around Fort Union, which he had left, Lynx could imagine the torture he was now undergoing. Therefore he was somewhat disappointed when Big Red spoke up in a guarded tone to announce:

"I'm afraid Little Doc's backslid. He smuggled a big jug of firewater aboard just in case of snakebite or sickness. I reckon he's decided he's feeling poorly."

"I've got a few jugs stowed away for the same purpose," Lynx acknowledged with a hint of a smile crooking his lips. "Nothing like it to clean out gunshot or knife wounds. And I've been worried maybe he'd accidentally find one of them. I guess I'd better go see he don't dose himself too heavy."

A few minutes later the young brigade leader returned to the fire with Little Doc and there was a hangdog air to the set of the emaciated medico's pallid, hollow cheeked face. But Diana spoke up, giving Little Doc no chance to feel anyone had noticed.

"Do you think it's quieted enough that we could get back on the river, Lesky?"

The squall had blown itself out shortly after dark and now the rain had quit too, so that an ominous quiet lay over the blackened wilderness; a quiet so absolute, except for the sound of the river, that one instinctively lowered the voice when speaking, lest it carry farther than intended.

"I have an idea we—" something in the night beyond caught Lynx's ear, cutting his speech short. He glanced at Big Red.

"Too late now," the burly redhead murmured, his great beard brushing up and down on his chest as he nodded. "They're in so close, if we run for it they'd shoot us down quickly."

"What is it!" Diana whispered in alarm, her anxious eyes upon Lynx as he stood searching the night's blackness beyond. "What's wrong?" she demanded when he made no immediate answer.

"We've set too long," he replied without shifting his eyes. "Those horse-killers are out there ready to fall on us. I'd never believed horseflesh could have stood it, but that don't help us now. We got to play it out smart and make our hand go as far as it will." He swung around, stooped, and began piling the split driftwood Little Doc had collected, upon the fire.

A moment later the flames began leaping, climbing higher and higher, fighting the engulfing blackness back and clearing a growing circle of light around the little camp. Perhaps the bold move decided the human wolves in the night beyond; made them wonder if perhaps the camp was stronger than they thought, so might be better to investigate before attacking. For a moment later a rider appeared out of the gloom beyond the farthest reaches of the light. He rode forward confidently, coming within reach of the firelight's full force.

"Piegan Pete!" Lynx heard Little Doc murmur behind him. For his part, he had never seen the man before. To himself he acknowledged that the fellow now before him was a damned handsome Devil. His glittering black eyes were both cruel and ruthless. The horse he rode seemed to be out of style with the rest of him. It was a flea-bitten roan in pitiable condition.

CHAPTER TWO

Set For The Kill

"LIGHT and rest your saddle, stranger," Lynx invited as if he had no inkling that anything was wrong. "We just finished off the last quarter of a buckskin, or we'd invite you to have some grub. But we wasn't expecting company in this weather."

A cynical smile twisted the renegade squaw-man's sensual lips. He swung forward and came out of the saddle. As if that was a signal, twenty dark-faced young braves drifted into sight like so many soundless shadows, closing in behind him.

On the ground, Piegan Pete was as big a man as Lynx himself, at least six-feet-four in his mocassin feet. And while he had the same blacksmith-like depth of chest, his shoulders had a sloping, muscle-bound appearance, lacking the square-cutness and cat-like litheness of movement that characterized Lynx. But in his face was the greatest difference, for though its features were darkly handsome, it was lined with a plain map of the man's treachery.

"The warmth of your fire's all we ask, mister," he declared, pacing forward, his hands held forward to the heat. "We had a chunk of jerky apiece awhile back."

Watching him as he came forward, Lynx knew when he came within sight of Diana. For the gleam in his black eyes sharpened with intense interest. Then his eyes swung back to Lesky.

"See something you like?" Lynx murmured with a knowing grin. "Sit down and look some more."

"She your woman?" the squaw-man demanded, following Lynx's example and squatting beside the fire. His Piegan warriors ranged themselves in behind him, appearing to welcome the fire's heat as they approached it and sat down.

"No one ever heard me lay no claim to her," Lynx shook his head. "I've seen several pretty good men try it. They're all dead. She's bad luck to men."

"Not to me she wouldn't be," the rene-

gade murmured. "MacDougal offered me five hundred prime plews to grab her for him."

"You see why now?" Lynx asked lightly. "And MacDougal's dead."

"Yeah, I know," Piegan Pete nodded. "We found his carcass in a backwater this morning. Until then I thought I was still chasing him. But I still don't know why he wanted her that bad. Anyway if I'd got her for him, I don't think I'd give her up to such an old fool for no five hundred prime plew."

"What would you be willing to give for her?" Lynx asked with an apparent smile.

"Why should I pay anything?" Piegan Pete's arrogance surfaced. "After all—" he spread his hands, glanced to either side at the blood hungry young braves backing him. "But if you want to keep everything on a friendly basis, I'll make a trade."

His predatory head swiveled as he sent his voice out into the blackness behind: "Elk Horn," he bellowed in his native Piegan tongue, "bring Marie!" His black eyes came back to Lynx.

"You won't get a bad bargain either. I was south in the Bighorns two weeks ago and stopped by old Jean LaRoche's post up there. Jean's like me. Lived among the Indians so long he thinks like one. He's got squaws and kids strung out among all of them down there. But this gal is his favorite daughter. She cost me plenty, but she got even more wildcat in her than I like. I've beat hell outa her and I still gotta keep her under guard or she'd kill me. That damned French blood—" he shook his head in disgust. "Once they get on the fight, they got no sense, no feeling, nothing."

A PAIR of husky young braves appeared out of the gloom dragging a struggling, fighting girl between them. As they neared the fire so that Lynx could see, a swift, cold anger knotted in his stomach.

For Marie LaRoche presented a pitiful picture. What there was left of her clothing clung to her in tatters. And hardly a visible part of her body was not bruised black and blue. Her jet black hair hung in snarled rat-tails almost to her shapely waist and still looked drenched from the recent downpour of rain. But abused as she had been, there was still an undiminished desirability about her trim figure. And in her dark blue eyes blazed the fires of defiance equally undiminished. She spat at the white renegade beside Lesky as the braves dragged her before them. But she missed his lustful face.

"Cat!" he snarled, knowing what she had intended. "If I thought it would do any good I'd have you beaten again until you couldn't crawl. But only a fool beats up a horse he wants to trade."

"So," the girl sneered, "even against you and your twenty dogs, Marie wins." She spoke rapidly in the Shoshone tongue. "They tell around my father's fort how this Piegan Pete fellow he takes and tames any woman he wants. I hear that when I'm a little girl and I say, 'Here's one woman that whitefaced Piegan thief will never tame—"

"Quiet girl!" Lynx murmured in a low tone. "The whitefaced Piegan does not have to trade with me unless he chooses. Too much talk and he may decide to keep you and see Death tame you." He spoke rapidly in the same tongue. A glance at Piegan Pete's dark face satisfied Lynx that the renegade was not fluent in Shoshone and had not followed what he or the girl had just said.

"You jabber that stuff almost as good as she does," Piegan Pete growled. "I didn't understand all of it."

"She was cussing you out and I told her to be quiet or I'd trade my woman to you for horses."

"Oh no," the white renegade grinned evilly. "I can't spare no horses, but I think I'd just as soon have her taken off my hands. If I killed her I might have to stay away from her old man's country in the Bighorns."

The girl suddenly shouted shrilly, "I know you! You passed through my father's fort five years ago," the girl's now excited and strangely hopeful voice cried unexpectedly, jerking Lynx's eyes to her face which he now found filled with joy. "I've carried a picture of you in my heart ever since. My mother's people say you are as brave and deadly as the lynx."

"What's that?" Piegan Pete demanded. "What is that wildcat saying?"

"She recognizes me," Lynx drawled. "I passed through her father's fort once." He went up to his feet, one long easy movement of grace such as characterized him and had

suggested in other men's minds long before the nickname of Lynx. He was standing before the white renegade beside him realized he had moved, and alarm shot through the fellow's dark eyes. Then subsided as Lynx explained:

"I'll go to the boat and get something as a present for your men."

"Fine," the squaw-man nodded. "Sure, maybe the boys will decide they can get along without lifting your hair. You're about the smartest feller I ever met, friend."

AS Lynx started to move off toward the river, the half-breed girl suddenly jerked free of her guards and dashed to Lesky's side. The bucks started to lunge after her, but their white leader's voice restrained them.

"Let her go," he ordered. "She seems to like him. But if she don't and tries to knife him, that's his lookout."

Lynx strode on out of the circle of firelight and into the surrounding gloom, the girl following him. He reached the mackinaw without speaking to her. His mind was now racing at top speed, seeking some way to extricate his party from the squaw-man's menace. For he was not deceived by the talk of a friendly trade. His thoughts were broken by her fingers lightly plucking at his buckskin sleeve.

"He plays with you like cat with mouse," she murmured anxiously. "He means to kill all of you but the yellow haired girl. If you have firewater, enough to make them all drunk, bring it quickly before he decided he's played long enough. The factor at Fort Union sent them away two nights ago, to ambush and take the girl for him. The only way to stop them is with much firewater. They will drink until they sleep."

"Well, Little Doc will enjoy it anyhow," Lynx murmured grimly. He loosened a tie rope so that he could lift one of the heavy buffalo hides protecting the cargo of beaver plew. Then working his arm in between bales he found two of his hidden jugs of whiskey and brought them out. He turned back to the campfire with a big jug in each hand.

As he walked into the circle of light with Marie still following at his heels, Lynx realized the truth in what she had said of Piegan Pete's true intent. For he found the renegade's black eyes fixed upon him. Evidently he was jealous of the affection Marie had for Lynx. He was about to spring to his feet and speak. But at that precise moment Diana shot from the lean-to on the far side of the fire, her first movement since the renegade had entered the camp.

"Lesky, how much longer is this going on, haggling around about trading me off as if I were a horse," she stormed. "Ask that dirty, stinking beast his price and give it to him. Give him all the fur we've got, but get him out of camp. I can't stand him around any longer!"

For a moment Lynx was dumbfounded. He had thought Diana had wised up under the hardships and dangers of recent weeks since they had fled across the Main Range into Dakota Territory. They had been trying to escape the menace of the ruthless Hudsons Bay factor, Beaver Ruck, who had killed Diana's father, the last free trader opposing his determination to control the fur of Oregon Territory for his company. He had expected that she would understand what he was attempting to work on Piegan Pete, but it seemed her haughty finishing school dignity and unreasoningness was still with her. Now the fat was in the fire for sure.

"So," the renegade squaw-man was purring, the jealousy gone from his eyes and forgotten, "there is wealth in this camp as well as beauty!"

CHAPTER THREE

Whiskey Lends a Hand

"YEAH, you sure are getting a deal on this trade—in some ways," Lynx declared pushing on past Diana with a smile on his lips as if no harm had been done. "The wealth and the beauty go together, so even if I do get the best of the deal on the women you get enough prime plews with the woman I'm trading you to make up for what she lacks in the head. So let's drink to the future happiness of us both."

"No. I don't believe in drinking when I'm trading," Piegan Pete almost shouted. The desire was so strong in him as he eyed the jugs that it almost hobbled his tongue. "I'm an old enough hand to know when I need a clear head."

"Sure, sure," Lynx resumed his seat beside the renegade before the fire, "a clear head's the only thing for trading. But this

trade is over. You got a new woman and a mackinaw load of fur to console you for her empty head. And I got me a new woman and no stinking plew to worry about no more." He jerked a cork with his strong white teeth, spat it out, and appeared to drink deeply. "Wagh!" He released his held breath with a rush as he pulled the jug from his lips. "Drink up! We should celebrate!"

"No—no, I'm not much of a drinking man," the squaw-man muttered, the glittering desire in his black eyes belying his words. "I don't go much—for the stuff."

"Little Doc! Come on. Pass a jug with our redskin friends. Big Red! Come on. It's time to celebrate." But Lynx did not chance a look at his giant, redbearded companion lest a look of understanding pass and be intercepted by the renegade squaw-man beside him to warn him of the true intent of this drinking. A glance at the fellow, however, told him he had no worry of that, for Piegan Pete seemed unable to take his eyes from the jug Lynx had placed between them.

"I could sure use a spot of drinking," Big Red rumbled, ambling around to the other side of the white renegade and seating himself. "Pass the panther juice, friend," he laid a big paw on Piegan Pete's shoulder in an air of friendly familiarity. "Nothing like it to take the misery out of a man after he gets his hide chilled."

The squaw-man seized the jug with hands that trembled slightly. He passed it to Big Red with a quick, jerky movement as if handling something hot and then forced his eyes away and straight ahead of him into the fire as the jovial giant drank long and noisily, letting the potent liquid gurgle in his great throat.

"Wagh! Who—o—o—ee!" O'Hara roared, like the safety valve of a boiler popping off, when at last he lowered the jug from his lips and let his pent up breath rush out. He smacked his lips, wiping his mustache and beard along the sleeve of one forearm. "Man, man! They got no better in the best damn saloon in Saint Looey! Have a nip, man. It won't hurt yuh!"

"Good stuff, ain't it," Lynx declared. "I feel better already. I think another shot would go good."

Piegan Pete seized the jug again to pass it over. Mid-way, he hesitated.

"Go ahead, have one," Lynx encouraged. "This is your drink by rights."

"No—no!" The fellow shoved the jug on Lesky's way, almost a frantic motion as if to get the sight of it and the tantalizing smell away from him before it overpowered him. "I just can't—I don't like the stuff!"

"Don't know what you're missing," Lynx declared in a comradely, good-natured way. "This here's something I've saved a long time. Don't often run into anything as good this far from Saint Looey." Again he drank with pretended great relish.

MEANWHILE Little Doc had gotten the second jug started around among the young bucks who followed Piegan Pete. Lynx finished his second pull just in time to see that jug returned to the little medico. He caught the agonized look in the eyes of Robin as he hefted it.

"Lesky, do you have any more of this stuff," Little Doc called. "This jug's evaporated."

"You break out some of that medicine you brought," Lynx suggested good naturedly. "Then I'll stake you boys to the next one."

"I think I could stand another sample of that there corn honey," Big Red spoke up, on the other side of Piegan Pete.

Once more the renegade seized the jug. This time there was a definite tremble in his hands as his tortured nerves jumped under the relentless force of desire. He hesitated a moment before speaking.

"I guess I aught to have a little drink with you boys," he muttered, glancing quickly from side to side at Lynx and Big Red. "I don't like to be unsociable and if —if this is as good whiskey as you fellers say—I reckon a little nip won't hurt me none."

"Corse not!" O'Hara boomed, whacking the renegade on the back. "That there liquor is good for what ails yuh! It slides down like cream going down a cat's throat. Hist it high and swaller."

The squaw-man tipped the jug to his lips, then jerked it down, taking only one short sip, which he held in his mouth and swallowed slowly as he passed the jug on to O'Hara.

"It is pretty good, ain't it!" he murmured when the last bit had been swallowed.

"None better was ever made, even in Scotland," Big Red roared. He again sucked at the jug's neck with greedy sounds of enjoyment, this time with Piegan Pete unable to resist watching.

"I feel a jig coming on!" O'Hara bellowed like a good natured clap of thunder as he plopped the jug down before the dark faced renegade and sprang to his feet.

"I'm a mountain man feller from the high Rockies," O'Hara rumbled as his feet began a slow, rhythmic shuffle.

"My maw was a grizzly, my old man was a bear;
I howl like a king-wolf when I go on a tear.
I float my stick purty and lift smart beavers' plew;
Then I buy me some whiskey and get drunk with you!"

All around the fire spirits were rising; and here and there among the young braves watching, a spontaneous smile brought animation and life into a dead-pan, with a low grunting chuckle of amusement at some ridiculous contortion to which Big Red was just then subjecting his giant frame.

Piegan Pete, too, was forgetting to keep his guard up, amused by the massive redhead's self-composed chants and dance steps. Lynx watched as the fellow tried another pull at the jug. And this time he forgot to make it short. When he set it back between them, Lesky hefted it and found it almost empty. While all eyes were held by O'Hara's antics, he made another trip to the mackinaw and returned this time with four fresh jugs. But a finger of concern was beginning to cause him discomfort, for he had only two more left. And the renegade crowd, by all indications, was going to be able to absorb more than that before there was any danger of them losing interest and passing out. It would be bitter irony if the scheme backfired and he merely got them drunk enough to really bring out their savage instincts at their worst. But all a man could do was to play his cards the best he knew how and wait to see how they would fall.

LITTLE DOC relieved Lynx of three of the four new jugs. And from the contented look in his bloodshot old eyes, which

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had shown the torturing want of a drink all day, Lesky knew that he for one was not limiting his drinking to a mere pretense.

Piegan Pete had finished off the first jug and his guarded tension was slipping away now as it warmed his innerds. A good natured leer had replaced the confident and contemptuous sneer in the twist of his heavy lips.

"This *is* good stuff," he declared, turning his black eyes to Lynx a moment, after a generous sample of the second jug.

"The best that ever come west of the river," Lynx bragged, pretending a slight thickness of the tongue. He seized the jug and pretended another long, hungry pull before he put it back in its place between them, smacking his lips loudly. "Come on, drink up," he encouraged. "I got plenty more. You're my friend. Don't be so bashful. You didn't start until after we did. We're drinking men in this camp."

"Ho, you think you're drinking men, huh?" Piegan Pete had enough liquor in him now to feel ringy and reckless. He histed the jug and let the fiery whiskey gurgle down his throat in thirsty gulps, showing off. "I'll bet when you've passed out and snoring like a baby I can still walk a straight line," he challenged, mopping at his beard-stubbled lips with one forearm.

"Ho, ho! My friend, you got a bet!" Lynx chortled. "I'll get two new jugs."

He was careful to let the boastful squawman keep the jug they had started working on until he got back. And he was pleased to see that the fellow did not let it remain idle. But when he came back with the last two jugs of whiskey, he suggested:

"Better give that there part of a jug on over to Robin and your boys. And which ever one of us wins, he gets the other man's whiskey that's left. Fair enough?"

"Sure," the renegade nodded, his black eyes already becoming a little glassy. "I'm going to enjoy drinking your whiskey."

Lynx placed the jugs between them and sat down. He seized one and the first drink he took out of it was not pretended. But after that it was always he who seized his jug first for another drink. And without letting Piegan Pete realize it, he alternated jugs and faked his drinking so that the renegade white was lowering the level in both jugs.

Finally Big Red's repertoire ran out and he returned to his place on the other side of Piegan Pete, breathing noisily and full of good fellowship.

"Pass a mountain man the molasses!" he boomed.

"Don't want to be stingy, friend," the white renegade chuckled thickly, "but we're having a contest. I'm putting our young friend to sleep. He thought he was a drinking man, so I had to show him. Ain't there another jug you can use?"

"Sure, I got some," Big Red boomed. "I'll get it." He eyed Lynx, feigning heavy lidded, dull eyed signs of being near his saturation point. And he did not miss the sly wink that came his way as one droopy lid seemed to momentarily stir from its drugged lethargy. "My bullboat was so light the danged wind skipped it all over the river, so I hadda ballast her down. It ain't as good as Lesky's, but it sure'll make a man happy."

He made a quick trip to the river bank where the boats were tied up. And when he returned, six more big jugs in his arms, Lynx felt his worries were over.

"Here, have a shot of mine," O'Hara invited after giving all but one jug to Little Doc to distribute among the warriors as replacements were needed. "You can stand to spot Lesky one good drink out of another jug and still win your bet."

"Sure!" the Piegan leader snorted, throwing Lynx a wabbly, sideways look of disgust. "He's out right now and don't know it." He took Big Red's proffered jug and drank deeply.

"Good!" he muttered, letting it back to the ground with a plunk, as if it taxed his strength to hold it longer.

Lynx was now keeled over on his face, his head on his feet, in a limber heap. The renegade gave him a scornful glance. "Thinks he's a drinking man!" He leaned back and stretched out upon the ground. "Think I'll just rest awhile so I'll be ready if he happens to wake up. I'll get him so drunk he'll sleep for a month." He broke off with an ugly chuckle. Within a minute he was snoring.

There were casualties among the Piegan warriors, too. But a few were still working hard at finishing off the liquor. And until the last one laid down and began snoring, Lynx remained a disjointed heap. But the hold-outers were not long in giving up after

they started working on Big Red's whiskey. And a big grin was causing twitches in his facial muscles that animated his fiery beard when Lynx straightened suddenly a few minutes after the last brave tumbled.

"I made it myself," O'Hara chuckled. "I never touch it myself, neither."

AFTER that they moved fast, stripping the renegade bunch of rifles and their waiting horses of all gear. All of it Lynx had loaded aboard and choused the horses off, leaving the murderous bunch afoot with only hand arms.

"Ain't you gonna bash in their heads?" Big Red demanded. "You know what they come here intending to do."

"If I didn't think there was any other chance of getting clear of them, I'd do it. Even then such killing'd be hard to stomach. I think we can get clear of them without it."

"You're not going to kill him?" Marie demanded, having gotten the gist of Lynx's speech as she hovered nearby. She confronted him now, speaking in an excited whisper. "He'll follow you like a wolf and try again to kill you if you don't kill him now. You must! I'm going with you too, and just for that he would follow to kill you."

"No, Marie. We'll be far down the river before he ever awakes. Go to the boat now while I bring Robin."

Lynx turned back on silent feet to the fire, making his way to the far side where Little Doc lay, having sampled Big Red's concoction and passed out too. He grasped the pitiful little old alcoholic gently, but Robin threw his hand off, jerking upright. Years of constant excess had toughened his innerds so that even O'Hara's potent brew affected him less than the average man. He shook his head hard, glanced around. A light of at least partial understanding coming to his eyes.

"I can walk, Lesky. Thanks," he muttered, climbing unsteadily to his feet.

"Got to be quiet as—" Lynx started to caution him. But forgot it, jerking around as he heard sudden movement behind him. He was in time to see Marie jerking her hand from the knife she had been trying to free from Piegan Pete's belt.

The renegade had come to. He sat up with a jerk, glancing around, his eyes wild. He clawed at his gun. As he fired, Lynx hurtled directly at him. The shot went haywire missing the pouncing young brigade leader. An instant later Lesky landed on him with breath crushing impact.

Lynx's fist dimmed the renegade's lights again. But the shot had done damage, for several of the blood-thirsty warriors were rousing.

"Run for the boats! Get out in the river," Lynx cried, sighting Marie still hovering anxiously nearby and Diana running toward him from the boat. "Get aboard you women," he roared as he wheeled to see what Little Doc Robin was doing.

Little Doc was sprawled on the ground, his bony fingered hands clutching his middle. And blood was seeping up through the fingers. The renegade white's lead had missed its intended target, but it had still connected.

Lynx scooped the little man up as gently as he could and sprinted for the river. Within minutes the whole party of Piegan renegades would be on the war path.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Baits a Trap

A SPASMODIC hail of small arm lead snarled out after the fugitives. But the hands of the murderous renegades were still quite shaky.

Aboard, Lynx was too busy now as they renewed their fight with the wild Missouri to pay any attention to the occasional bullet hissing by.

Finally they worked out into the center where there was less danger of snags and only Big Red's pole at the bow was necessary as long as someone in the stern managed the rudder. Lynx left Marie at the rudder and went forward to where Diana was trying to do something for Little Doc.

"I washed the wound with some of that stuff those Indians were drinking," she explained. "It seemed to stop the bleeding. Do you think he has a chance to live?"

"No telling," Lynx replied. "He didn't have much but whiskey in him. If he was only a little stronger he might have a good chance." He examined the binding Diana had made on Little Doc's thin waist and begrudgingly acknowledged that it was a good job. He started to turn back to the stern, but she caught him by one arm.

"Are you really going to take that—that breed person with us? After the way she stirred that nest of hornets up and brought them down on us—got Little Doc shot, maybe killed?"

"You're a fine one to talk, blowing your top like you did, advertising our beaver plew to the worst bunch of killing, thieving renegades on the river," Lynx replied evenly. "Marie may not have a fine finish, but she knows how to keep her mouth shut and how to back up a man, something your eastern schooling didn't teach you."

"Oh, so you like her!" Diana exclaimed. "You think I was just indulging in a rattle-brained outburst of outraged finishing school dignity?

"You're a fool, Lynx Lesky! Maybe you've never been jealous, you cold, calm chunk of cock-sure egotism. Maybe you couldn't see what I saw in that Piegan Pete's snaky eyes!

"You couldn't understand how he felt, could you? He's wanted that girl. Wanted to tame her and make her be his and was willing to do anything, short of forcing her. Even that kind of a man has his pride.

"But you come along and give the little brown eyed wench one kind look and she comes to your heels like a devoted, tail-wagging dog. And you think he was just going to sit there and be satisfied about it?

"He was all but on his feet sending his red renegade killers after your hair when he saw you coming back with her still at your heels like a grateful puppy. I know how he felt! I felt like I'd almost enjoy sitting by and watching it happen. But no! I dashed out and made a fool of myself, didn't I? Went to babbling about beaver plew and distracted his attention from his jealousy so you'd have your chance to get him drunk. But I blew my top! It was the heroic Mister Lesky whose quick thinking saved our hair from the savages and got us out of the situation."

FOR a moment Lynx made no reply. He realized that perhaps there had been something sounder than feminine foolishness behind her unexpected action after all. She had the blood of Scott Livingstone, her great hearted father.

"Well, gosh almighty," he protested lamely, "can't a man kid you a little without—"

"Kid me indeed! Don't be a tail dragging dog, Lynx. I know when you're kidding and when you're not. Go on back to your little brown eyes who knows how to back up a man. If she's going with us, I'd offer her something to wear, if I had anything. But likely you have your own ideas about how's best to keep her warm."

"I didn't think you'd ever give me the satisfaction of hearing you talk like that," Lynx declared with a forced chuckle, slyly appealing to her pride, for the miles ahead held enough danger without division among them. "It's sort of a let down to find you're just as unreasoning a green-eyed jealous kitty as any other woman, ready to bare your claws and use them. How do you think you'd have acted, even with all your poise and superior background and advantages, if you'd just been through what Marie has? Would you have been any less devoted to a man who showed you a little kindness? She's just a child—a poor wilderness waif. And you let yourself think about jealousy!"

"Well why does she have to be such a darned attractive waif?" Diana complained, somewhat shamed by Lynx's words. "And don't give me that stuff about her being only a child, mister. Even abused as she's been, she's got something that makes any normal man look twice. I guess I ought to be ashamed, but I just don't know how far I can trust your judgment. After all, it's not a woman's brain that takes a man's eye or makes his heart jump."

"Ho, ho!" Lynx jeered goodnaturedly. "How I wish some of the high and mighty powder-puffs down in Saint Looey and points East could hear the dashing Diana Livingstone worrying about competition from a little half-breed girl with hardly enough of her torn and dirty buckskin clothing left to cover her."

THE GRAY of morning found them still safely afloat and racing along the swirling Missouri. Lesser men, without the keen night-sight enjoyed by true mountain men like Lynx and Big Red, would have been swept to disaster by the tricky waters. But even they could not endure such an unrelenting battle without fatiguing strain. As the sky lightened, they shoved ashore.

"I could eat a bull elk, even a buffalo, without even singeing off the hair," Big Red

announced. "If anyone asks me, I say it's about time to eat," he grinned broadly.

They finished eating and were set to go again. When Lynx returned to the boat he found Little Doc awake. Something in the old eyes made him stop and grip the wan hand.

"How's she go, Doc? I think we'll make Fort Pierre before long. There'll be a medic there. We'll get you fixed up."

Little Doc's gray head rolled weakly from side to side, his bloodless lips whispering: "It's no use, Lynx. A man knows when something with his name on it hit him. But don't feel sorry. You helped me feel like a man again. I was sober two whole days, but I'd never've held out. Maybe it's better this way."

"Don't believe it, Doc," Lynx scolded with mock disgust. "You got a lot to see yet. We're going to celebrate in Saint Looey."

But there was a driving sense of urgency riding him as he got them under way again. For he owed his life to Little Doc. The up-river fur thieves who had captured Big Red O'Hara and left permanent signs of torture on his big body, had smashed Lesky's shoulder with a rifle ball while he was in the act of rescuing the redhead.

And when they had arrived at a small island just above Fort Union, Lynx was very close to death. It had been Little Doc, the alcoholic derelict whose nightly bed was the sawdust of the Fort Union saloon, who had used his long-forgotten skill and had saved the young trapper's life.

In payment, Lynx had given him a large share of the plews he was taking to market and above all a chance to return to civilization and regain his respectability. But to Lynx's mind the debt was still unpaid. He had a chance now to make payment in full —he must save Little Doc's life.

The clouds had cleared and the sun was directly overhead when they swept around a bend and found Fort Pierre in sight ahead. Little Doc had lapsed into unconsciousness again, but something about the sight heartened Lynx.

He leaped ashore without waiting until they had tied up. They shoved the bow of the mackinaw into the quiet backwash below the landing. At the gate of the prim fort a sentry challenged him.

"I'm looking for a medic," the trapper explained earnestly. "We got a man that's bad hurt. Had a brush with Injuns last night."

"Sorry, mister," the guard declared. "I reckon you can wait if you like, but no telling when the doc will be back. He left not ten minutes ago to go bring a baby down at the little trading post about a mile down on the other side of the river. Trader's wife's having her first baby, but even at that I never heard of an Injun woman needing a medic. I guess Mahoney's making so much money since the big company sold out this place to the Army that he's decided to put on some dog."

"No telling how long something like that will take, is there?" Lynx muttered anxiously. "We'd better go on down there. Thanks, soldier."

BACK at the boat, after a hurried explanation, they swung back into the current. Minutes later they were poling hard to bring the heavy boat in to a nondescript appearing landing at a shabby, down-at-the-heels looking establishment on the opposite side of the river.

A swarm of ragged, dirty children, all dark skinned and black eyed but representing all possible shades of redheadedness, raced out to meet them. There were at least thirty of them, ranging from pitifully dirty little tikes barely able to toddle on up, through every possible variation of age between there and early teens.

"Irish breeds!" Big Red let out a snort of disgust. "I had no doubt an Irishman would do most anything, but putting redhair on the heads of that many poor Injun kids—no wonder—"

"Is the doctor here" Lynx called to one of the older boys, cutting O'Hara's grumbling short.

"Yeah, sure," the towsled, red-thatched head bobbed. "Come on in."

Carrying Little Doc on a buffalo robe stretched between them, Lynx and O'Hara hurried into the trader's fort, guided by the wide eyed boy.

"You've got a beard as red as my father's, mister," he observed wonderingly as he looked back once. Big Red only scowled and said nothing. They entered the enclosure and found themselves in a small courtyard upon which opened doorways from all sides, for the inside of the thirty-foot picket

type wall was lined on all sides with various sized buildings in various states of disrepair.

At that moment a door jumped open on the far side of the court and a blubber-bellied man with a beard that was all the boy had said, emerged announcing happily:

"It's another boy! It's a boy!" And from the door behind him sounded the cry of a newborn babe. Then he sighted the sober-faced little party just inside the outer gate.

"Don't stand there with your mouth open!" O'Hara snapped. "Show us where we find the doctor. We got a bad shot-up man here."

Mahoney's jaw snapped shut and without another word he turned and led the way to a doorway. Lynx knew instinctively that Big Red's gruff manner at a time when celebration seemed called for, had made them an enemy, but he hardly cared.

Inside the room which they entered, they found an Army officer in the act of shrugging back into his tunic.

When Lynx explained his errand, the officer nodded curtly. "It was hardly worth the bother coming down here. But—" he shrugged, spreading his hands.

"How bad's your friend hurt?"

"We were counting on your telling *us* that!" O'Hara growled impatiently.

"He's shot through the guts, sir," Lynx interjected quickly with an apologetic note. Something had put Big Red on the fight. The officer glanced at him sharply; then removed the tunic again as they laid Little Doc on a crude table. He examined the wound gravely, checked the heart action. Finally he looked up, his head shaking.

"I doubt if he'll live out the hour. It would be a bad wound in any man and he doesn't look as if he'd lived a life that would encourage vitality. There's nothing I know of to do that could help him."

In utter silence the two big trappers stood looking down upon the deathly features of the little, bird-like man they had known so briefly. The officer shrugged back into his tunic, packed his bag, and with a short salute departed. And for several minutes after he had gone, Lynx and O'Hara stood still unmoving, each mute with strange feelings they did not understand.

"I reckon we'd just as well take him along with us while he lasts," Big Red broke the silence at last. "He seemed to be getting such a kick outa this trip down the river. I reckon he'd rather be buried wherever we camp tonight than to be left here at this place."

Lynx nodded. But before he could speak a cold voice sounded behind them.

"How sentimental you two are."

They both wheeled at once. Just inside the doorway, eyeing them through narrowed hate-filled eyes, crouched Piegan Pete. In either hand he held long barreled Dragoons which were centered upon them unwaveringly.

"What say we finish out the game we started on last night," he mocked. "Or did you think you'd won the last pot?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Hell On All Sides

"THAT BIRD ain't human," Big Red broke his stupefied silence, "else how'd he get here?"

Piegan Pete's leer broadened. "I did kill two horses getting here. You turned them all loose, but my braves and I don't ride horses that will go off and leave us afoot, so they hadn't gone far. And I didn't have to travel all the kinks and curves the river makes, like you did. That's what you call, making your own luck."

"I suppose the Army medico being down here instead of at the Army fort was some more of that luck," Lynx suggested.

"I saw your old barfly friend take my lead in his guts," the renegade nodded proudly. "I figured you might put in at the fort for a medic. I figured to call him down here on some pretext, a gunshot wound or something. But Mahoney's wife saved me the trouble." He turned his face slightly so that his voice rolled back over his shoulder though his beady eyes never left the two menaced by his guns.

"Mahoney!"

"Yes, friend. Here I am," the trader hove into view just beyond the door. He crowded past Piegan Pete, panting softly from the exertion of hauling his huge bulk around. "I just been rounding up some of my brothers-in-law for a jury and guards," he wheezed. And Lynx then caught sight of a motley crowd of drunken bucks that had followed him and now waited just outside.

"Are these the men you were telling

about, friend?" the trader demanded with an air of great importance.

"These are," Piegan Pete nodded. "They come into my camp last night pretending to be right friendly. They set out drinks and got me and my men pie-eyed. I come to just in time to see them making off with my furs and my woman. They'd scattered my horses, but I managed to catch one and make it to a buffalo hunting camp where I got another, then made it here. I guess you know the rest."

Mahoney eyed the prisoners indignantly, then turned to Piegan Pete. "You saw my young wife's troubles and sent after the doctor for her first before you ever told me your troubles. And when the doctor left, you paid him. So now I will pay you. As bourgeois of this post, I have heard the case. What do you say boys?" he shouted to the assembled bucks just outside the door. There was an answering chorus of unenthusiastic grunts. Mahoney interpreted:

"Guilty! I therefore sentence you river pirates to twenty-five years hard labor!" He looked again at Piegan Pete. "And you, friend, take your fur and woman and good luck to you. Be careful who you drink with after this."

"Why you cheap, imitation Irishman you," Big Red let out an outraged bellow, "what kind of law do you think you are, holding court on your own right here under the nose of a States Army post? If you think there's any case against us, take us across the river there and see what the Army thinks of it."

"You must dye your beard, you windy pirate," Mahoney spat back. "I never knew a man who grew red hair who talked so much like a fool. Accordin' to fur-country law, the bourgeois sez what goes in his own fort, like anyone knows. I don't care what the Army thinks. I heared my friend's testimony, and I say you river pirates are going to do my work around here the next thirty years. That ought to teach you to steal an honest man's plews."

Big Red's control snapped. He lunged at Mahoney and was upon him even before Piegan Pete could get his guns into action. Then it was too late. For Lynx saw the momentary advantage surprise had given them, and he whipped the throwing knife from the sheath at the nape of his neck. The next instant it sliced into the muscle of the renegade gunman's right arm and the gun in that hand slipped from his shock-numbed fingers. And then Lynx was upon him, knocking his left-hand gun down as he squeezed the trigger so that it only spewed hot lead into the mud floor of the room. A sledge-like blow dropped him and Lynx scooped up his guns and retrieved the knife.

OUTSIDE the door the trader's red-skinned brothers-in-law were scattering in search of weapons. Lynx wheeled back

to grab Little Doc's unconscious body and saw Big Red jerking Mahoney's senseless form from the floor with a grip on his dirty beard. O'Hara swung the trader up across his shoulder and, still holding him by the beard, let him dangle down his back.

"I think we better go now," he rumbled.

Lynx started to lift Little Doc Robin as gently as he could so that his wound would not be reopened. But before he got his arms under him, the young trapper realized that the little medic was gone. Already the chill of death had settled. It no longer mattered how his body was handled.

But he shouldered the poor old fellow's dead form, unwilling to leave it here where it might not even be decently buried. And with a ready gun in one hand, Lynx stepped through the door, across the senseless figure of Piegan Pete; falling in behind Big Red who had stalked out confidently, his back shielded as it was.

But Lynx did not have such protection to give him unhurried confidence. He passed O'Hara and trotted on toward the gate, hoping their audacity would get them into the clear before Mahoney's Indian in-laws could get organized for action.

Lynx came into sight of the landing first. He pulled up short in his tracks. For swarming around on the landing were the Piegan renegades who followed Piegan Pete. Some were standing with ready guns, having recovered their rifles. Diana and Marie were guarded by four of these. And the others were passing bales of plew from the mackinaw and bull-boat to a big, canvas topped wagon of the kind used by buffalo hunters to get their hides back to camp. Without needing to be told, Lynx knew what had happened to the hunters from whom the renegades had "borrowed" their fresh horses.

A guard sighted him in the gate and turned to jabber excitedly to his fellows, turning their eyes toward Lynx. Strangely, not one of them lined a gun upon him. Instead they turned them all upon the two girls.

Lynx wheeled to Big Red who was just stalking up behind him. "Get yourself up there to Fort Pierre and get the Army down here before hell busts wide open. I'll stick around and try to see that them renegades don't fade away into the hills before you get the Army into action."

Big Red growled, "I ain't pulling out and leaving you with this mess on your hands. Not me!"

"You want to get us both killed and let them devils haul the girls?" Lynx demanded. "Your friend's in-laws'll be showing up in another minute. How many redskins and renegades you figure we can handle?"

"I don't like it," O'Hara grumbled. "But I reckon I *had* better do it. We sure raised the bid on a hell of a jackpot this time!"

He jerked his fingers clear of Mahoney's beard, letting it whip out of sight over his shoulder as the trader piled upon the ground at his heels.

"I don't like it," he repeated. "You set Little Doc down and keep your eyes open until I get back. I don't want to have to plant the two of you together."

Gently Lynx laid Little Doc's dead body against the foot of the stockade. Straightening, he drew the other pistol he had taken from Piegan Pete. Then he posted himself with his back against the broad gate-post where he could watch the inner court as well as the landing.

"All right," he murmured. "I'm set. How about you making some fast tracks now?"

Big Red hesitated another moment, unspoken protests upon his lips. Then he wheeled and headed upriver.

As if realizing his intent, several of the Piegans at the landing sprang out to give chase. And Lynx's guns went into action, knocking the legs out from under two in the lead. The others gave it up.

One of the rifle armed bucks swung up his firearm and drew aim. He was so close to the two captive girls that Lynx could not risk a shot. But Big Red had heard the shooting and was making a hard-to-hit target of himself. The buck's first shot threw up a geyser of dirt a dozen feet to one side of the escaping trapper. And he did not get another chance, for O'Hara dodged into a gully and dropped out of sight.

A groan at his feet jerked Lynx's attention away from Big Red's flight, to find Mahoney stirring. He turned to cover the red bearded trapper only to find Piegan Pete almost upon him, lunging in with an upraised club poised in his good hand.

Before Lynx could shift his guns, the club smashed down across his hands. He tried to fade back, his arms numb with shock.

But the gate-post was behind him. And then the swing of the club had reversed and it was sweeping in toward his face. Frantically he tried to dodge, but at that moment a hand seized one ankle, almost tripping him. He realized that Mahoney was in the fight now. And then the club connected, seeming to tear away his jaw.

Lynx felt the ground catch him, as if he had been a feather floating down upon it. And then the trader's angry voice protesting:

"No! Don't kill him. I'm going to throw him in the pit until he's so weak he won't be no trouble to handle. Then he's going to lick my boots the rest of his short life. I'll make him wish that damned red-beard hadn't got away."

CHAPTER SIX

Blood Trails a Killer

WHEN Lynx fought his way clear of unconsciousness he found himself in complete blackness, bound and gagged, at the muddy bottom of a dirt walled pit. His head was throbbing so that his ears roared. All his joints felt as if they had been smashed in by heavy mallets.

His legs as well as his arms were bound, he found. But after he had gathered his strength for several minutes, he determined to get his feet under him. He shoved himself over against one side of the pit and started struggling. But his efforts were short lived when the wall began crumbling down upon him. For a moment, as dirt and clods fell on all sides of him he was sure that he was going to be buried alive.

But after a minute the caving stopped. Lynx managed to get himself atop some of the dry dirt. There he rested for a time while the ache in his head subsided; for several good sized clods had added their bit to the work of Piegan Pete's heavy club. Gradually he collected his wits.

When he could think clearly he remembered Big Red's mission. He wondered if the big red head had made Fort Pierre. He wondered too where Diana and Marie and the fur were by now.

His thoughts were broken by the sound of hoofbeats. The sound came nearer. Then it stopped. For a time he could hear nothing. And then his heart leaped as he heard Big Red's angry bellow raising in protest:

"But I tell you, Lieutenant, this dirty, scavengering, booze and carrion-loving, counterfeit Irishman is in with them renegades. He says Lesky trailed Piegan Pete's bunch and their wagon away from here. It's a damned lie! We found the wagon ten miles down yonder where they'd stole a corral full of mules off'n a freight outfit, packed their fur onto them and left the wrangler full of lead. And then they split up all to hell and gone, every way. But we never seen no sign of Lesky, did we? You think he wouldn't have left sign which bunch made off with the women? He knew we'd be along directly and he wasn't born yesterday. But he never left no sign because he never got there. I bet he never left here. You ought to search the place!"

"You search me and I'll—I'll see there's trouble made about it in Washington!" Mahoney's angry voice challenged. "I been obeying all the damned trade laws. You ain't once found me violating. You ain't got no right. I even made no kick about the Injun liquor law and I've kept it!"

"If he's kept liquor away from the Injuns it's likely because he can't get enough for him and them too," O'Hara's roar sounded again. "You ought to search the place, Lieutenant. If you don't, I will!"

Lynx could not catch the officer's reply, but in a few minutes the horsemen started to move off again. Frantically the young trapper tried to call out, but the harsh gag killed the possibility of sound of any kind originating in his mouth. He forced himself to keep calm and lean back relaxed, saving his strength, as if his hope were not leaving him as the hoofbeats grew fainter in the distance.

WITHIN a few minutes the sound was gone. Again he was alone in the inky blackness of the wet hole. For a few minutes, hope had been there with him. Now it had gone, for he did not disillusion himself about what lay in store for him at the hands of the vengeful squaw-man trader.

And so he was not surprised sometime later when the covering over the hole was suddenly jerked clear so that the last weak rays of twilight and the stars in the clear blue evening sky above brought a welcome break in the engulfing blackness about him; and then it was spoiled by the appearance of Mahoney on the brink above. The leering,

bearded trader tossed something into the pit.

"There's your supper, mister. Go down in the mud after it like a hog. I'll teach you to pull high and mighty talk on Mike Mahoney!"

Lynx glared up at him without moving. His keen nose soon told him that the object the trader had tossed down was a piece of stinking, half-rotten meat. But he remained unmoving.

The leer faded from the trader's expectant face and peeved disappointment took its place when his captive refused to perform as he had expected.

"I aught to leave you gagged, but I don't want to miss out on what you'd like to say," he declared suddenly, new hope flaring in his green eyes. "And there ain't no reason to keep a blab on you now. No one's around now that'd pay no mind if they did hear you holler."

He disappeared a moment. Then he was back with a length of rope with a noose fashioned in one end. He dropped it over Lynx's head before the trapper realized what he intended. And then he hauled back on the line, pulling the prisoner up by his neck.

When he at last scrambled and clawed his way over the brink and the choking noose on his throat eased up its pressure, Lynx was too strangled to do anything but fall flat and suck in great lungs full of breath. He felt the blade of a knife thrust between the bonds and his body, and then the relief as the blade parted them and they fell away. But he still was too winded to attempt grappling with the trader when without a warning a hard-toed boot slammed into his ribs, spilling him back into the pit.

Lynx was enough recovered, however, so that his reflexes were back something like normal. He turned over in mid-air and landed on his feet, like the agile cat for which he had been nicknamed.

He stood a moment rubbing his throat, before he looked back up. Then he found Mahoney leaning forward over the edge of the pit expectantly. He turned his back, scornfully, and sat down.

"Cuss, damn you! Go ahead and cuss. I want to hear you cuss," the trader urged. "Not many trappers left as proud and fancy as you make out to be. I'd like to hear how you can cuss."

Lynx did not stir, but ignored the fellow as if completely unaware of his existence. After a moment, Mahoney stirred impatiently.

"Alright! Be mulish. But just remember, mister. You'll cuss before you ever get outa that there hole. You'll cuss and be glad to."

With that he swished the covering back over the pit. The darkness closed in again. But somehow Lynx felt better, for at least he knew that if he could somehow contrive to get up the twelve foot wall, he would not be hampered further by a heavy cover on his homemade dungeon.

FOR a time he sat quietly, wondering about Diana. It was not a pleasant prospect to contemplate. With stolen pack mules, the renegades would travel far and fast. If he was to have any hope of catching up before they reached the more populated country down-river, where they could lose themselves among the throngs of other travelers, then he must get back on the river without delay. He was sure the renegades would stick close to the river.

Hours dragged by. The fort quieted, and no one had come near his place of imprisonment again. Out on the plains, coyotes began to howl and the curs around the fort yapped back at them. Finally Lynx stirred himself, getting up and stretching. If he was going to escape before daylight, he decided, he had better get started.

First he considered the possibility of gouging out hand and toe holds. But one short try was all it took to show the impracticability of that. It started a recurrence of the caving and with it a fresh awakening of the fear of being buried here alive.

For a moment, Lynx considered the idea that perhaps he should wait until he was taken out of the pit before he tried his escape. But immediately he rejected it, for within a few days he would lose all chances of overtaking Piegan Pete and his renegades.

And so Lynx reached a decision. If he could keep on top, perhaps the very readiness of the walls to cave-in would lend itself to his salvation. He stood motionless a moment. And then he began gouging at the crumbly walls as if he wanted to be buried alive.

Dirt began pouring down and the young

trapper, battered by rocks and clods and half stifled by raising dust, fought desperately to keep on top of it. It was a terrifying battle in the utter blackness, unable as he was to see where the next collapsing body of dirt would rush at him from.

And then he felt the covering of the pit pressing down upon his head. He fought his way clear of it as the last chunks of caving dirt tumbled into the hole. Then he was stumbling out into the clear, drawing great lungs-full of clean, sweet night air into his tortured body.

For several moments he crouched in a deep shadow, alert for some sign of detection. He found himself inside the courtyard of the fur fort, and realized the pit had been concealed under a buffalo hide.

The gates were open; evidently Mahoney felt secure because of his numerous Indian in-laws. And Little Doc's body was gone from the place where Lynx had left it just outside. He wondered if the soldiers had taken it back to Fort Pierre for burial.

The mackinaw was still at the landing. But O'Hara's bull-boat was gone. Lynx left the boat riding in the current at the far end of the landing, for a fast get-away. Then he stole back into the fort and to the store room, to arm himself.

TRADING POSTS and little settlements were more numerous along the stretch of river down which Lynx's heavy boat raced as a new day broke. He had a hard time managing the cumbersome craft by himself. But at each sign of habitation he put in to inquire after sign of the Piegan bunch. Each time, however, he met the same disappointment.

He had hoped that the renegades would decide to stop somewhere and celebrate when they were far enough to feel secure against any possibility of Fort Pierre soldiers finding them.

But by noon he was wondering if perhaps they had scattered more widely than he supposed and would not rendezvous until they reached some important point like the confluence of the Platt and the Missouri at Council Bluffs. He decided to drive straight on with no more lost time at settlements. For if he reached the Bluffs first, he could wait until the Piegan outfit showed up. He might have a chance to rescue the girls.

All through the late afternoon, having thus made up his mind, Lynx poled hard, adding all the speed he possibly could. He flashed by a wood-camp and another sprawling young settlement, but did not pause. His goal now was to reach Council Bluffs as quickly as possible.

At sundown he did not stop, for nothing was as important as getting down to the Platt in time to head off Piegan Pete.

As evening shadows began closing in he caught the shine of lights along the shore ahead and knew that another trading post or settlement was just ahead. But the fact held no interest for him. His eyes remained intent upon the water before him. It was only as he swept past the landing that he glanced shoreward, and back. And then his eyes jerked back to the shore again, this time intently. For at the end of the landing, bobbing lightly upon the current, was a big bull-boat that he was sure belonged to Big Red O'Hara.

A moment later Lynx had decided he could not go on without investigating and he poled hard to make the shore. He brought the mackinaw in a quarter of a mile below.

He came back into the little settlement and found himself in the substantial district where men with wives and families lived. Here was a small cluster of clean, painted houses. And the block just beyond was built up with stores and shops, and a small inn. It was a quiet street, hushed now with evening's quiet, and for a moment Lynx felt he had been foolish to put in from the river for Big Red would waste no time in such a quiet place.

But from somewhere beyond he caught the awakening stir of ribald life. And he found that the ground dropped away beyond the quiet street of shops and stores, dipping down into a hollow behind them. And down there someone was busy hammering out raucous notes on a tinny piano. A small grin came to the trapper's lips as he hit the downward slope. If O'Hara was in this town, he knew where to find him.

The road he followed twisted as it descended, so that at the bottom it headed straight out toward the river and the landing. Either side was lined with saloons and honkytonks of various kinds and down the center was a broad, dark band reached by light from neither side.

Lynx was treading the dark strip in the street's center, sizing up the layout to decide where to start, when he sighted a big string of pack mules resting under heavy loads, heads drooping, in a space between two buildings. A small fire winked in the night just behind them, beyond the rear of the buildings.

Quickly, with hope springing up within him, Lynx doubled back, dodged across a narrow shaft of light, and ducked into a narrow alley leading to the rear.

A FEW minutes later he was in the darkness just beyond the fire and his heart was racing with excitement. For warming themselves by the fire, and consoling themselves with a long necked bottle of some potent whiskey, were two of Piegan Pete's renegades. And behind them, roped together and with a lead rope on one buck's wrist, were the two girls.

Lynx was intent upon catching Diana's eye when a hand suddenly clamped down upon his shoulder. Only his Indian-like self-control held him steady instead of making a startled jump. He had forgotten Big Red for the moment. And now he found himself looking into O'Hara's laughing blue eyes and could not believe it.

"It's about time you showed up," Lynx murmured without a single sign of the riot of emotion within him.

"I was thinking the same about you," Big Red replied in a guarded whisper. "Shall we visit now or wait until the gals can be in on it?"

"You run the gals down this back way to your bull-boat," Lynx directed. "I'll haul the mule string up over the hill through the law and order part of town. The mackinaw's tied up beyond there."

"Like hell," the big redhead growled. "I ain't getting myself done out of all the excitement like that. The gals know the way to the river and if they cain't handle a boat, it's about time they learned. You lead the jacks into law and order and I'll bring up the rear."

Lynx shrugged, knowing the futility of arguing. Together they closed in upon the two bucks squatted before the fire. They came out of the shadows so suddenly that Diana almost screamed, hardly able to credit her eyes. A moment later the two renegade braves had been dispatched without a struggle. Lynx slashed the rope from the girls' wrists with a knife still dripping blood.

"You two beat it down this back way to the landing. The bull-boat's tied up out on the far end. Make it fast and get on the river. The mackinaw's tied up down the other side of town. You can't miss it. We'll be there pronto with the mules and our fur. Get going!"

He waited for no word of greeting from either of them. Instead he headed toward the head of the pack string, intent upon the job at hand.

Lynx hugged the side of the nearest building, crouching below window level each time he passed a beam of light, hiding himself in the shadows as much as possible.

But one of the weary mules, hating the redskin smell that had been with them throughout the punishing night and day just past, scented Lynx when he was no more than half way to the head of the column, and let out a long, enthusiastic bray of welcome.

A chair scraped abruptly, as if with alarm, somewhere on the floor beyond the wall where the trapper crouched. And he sprinted forward, feeling somehow that the time for caution was gone.

Lynx reached the front of the lot where the saddle horse at the head of the pack string stood waiting. But the horse began to back away in alarm. The trapper had just managed to get the end of the trailing mecate, dragging from the hackamore, when the batwings of the saloon just beyond squealed violently as they were slammed open.

Lynx wheeled and was in time to see Piegan Pete himself stride out importantly, his chest extended. Lynx stepped into a beam of light where the renegade leader could see him. For a moment the fellow seemed to freeze, his eyes unbelieving. Then he was clawing for a gun thrust through his belt.

The trapper chose his knife, a blade that had come from Mike Mahoney's stockroom. It flashed from his fingers before the gun cleared the squaw-man's belt. He saw it bury itself to the hilt in the fellow's burly throat. And then Lynx wheeled to coax his way up to the horse's head where he could jump the saddle.

He was mounted, his right foot just forking into its stirrup, when a wild war-whoop

battered down all other noise around them. He got a glimpse of Piegan Pete still upright, clinging stubbornly to an awning post, pointing with a knife he had clawed from his own throat, a knife that dripped his own life's blood. And as that blood gushed down his own throat, he pointed the eyes of his men, tumbling through the doorway, to Lesky.

Lynx held up the nervous horse beneath him long enough to slam a round of fast shots into the bunched ranks of the dying squaw-man's warriors, scattering them like quail. And as he wheeled away, giving the horse his head, he saw their devilish white leader collapse into the dust of the street.

And then, with O'Hara squawling like fighting wildcats, behind, they roared out into the street and headed at a labored dead-run for the hill.

ON ALL sides men were pouring from saloons, dancehalls, and elsewhere to see the excitement. And some hilarious souls, just to be in the spirit of the thing, began throwing lead, joining the Piegans in sending fire after the fleeing pack-train.

On the hill above there was wonder, too, about the sudden sound of pitched battle. Citizens stood in their doorways wide eyed with surprise. Then as Lynx and the pack-train rushed by, brought up by a roaring giant whose beard streamed back across his shoulder like a trail of fire, their surprise became indignation. They rushed into their homes and returned ready for battle with assorted kinds of firearms, determined to avenge the violation of the sanctity of their peaceful section.

Down on the river beyond, the girls were waiting, but there was no time for talk as the two trappers raced up with the pack outfit. Mule after mule was stripped and turned loose, the precious fur dumped back into the mackinaw.

"Think we got more plew than we had stolen off us," Lynx murmured as the last load was stowed.

"Reckon we should take some back, or you think we earned it?" Big Red chuckled.

Lynx jerked the tie rope free and leaped aboard as O'Hara pushed them clear. Marie was handling the bow pole until he came aboard and Lynx headed on back to the stern where Diana manned the other pole. Her eyes widened as he neared her. She called out:

"Lynx—"

"Howdy," he nodded. "You want to handle the rudder till we get out?"

"Lynx!" There was protest in her voice. "You've been hurt! Your left side's all bloody. You'd better let—"

"Pshaw, gal! That's how this plew is paid for. Besides, I can't be bothered now. We're headed for Saint Louis!"

THE END

"REBELLION AT GUN RIVER!"

To wild Jim Reed, the booming town of Gun River was perfect pickin's for a smart, quick-triggered gent who liked money-fat banks and twisting midnight trails. . . . To his strange pardner, Doc Plummer, it was a town of honest and friendly frontier folks who were worth fighting—and if need be—dying for!

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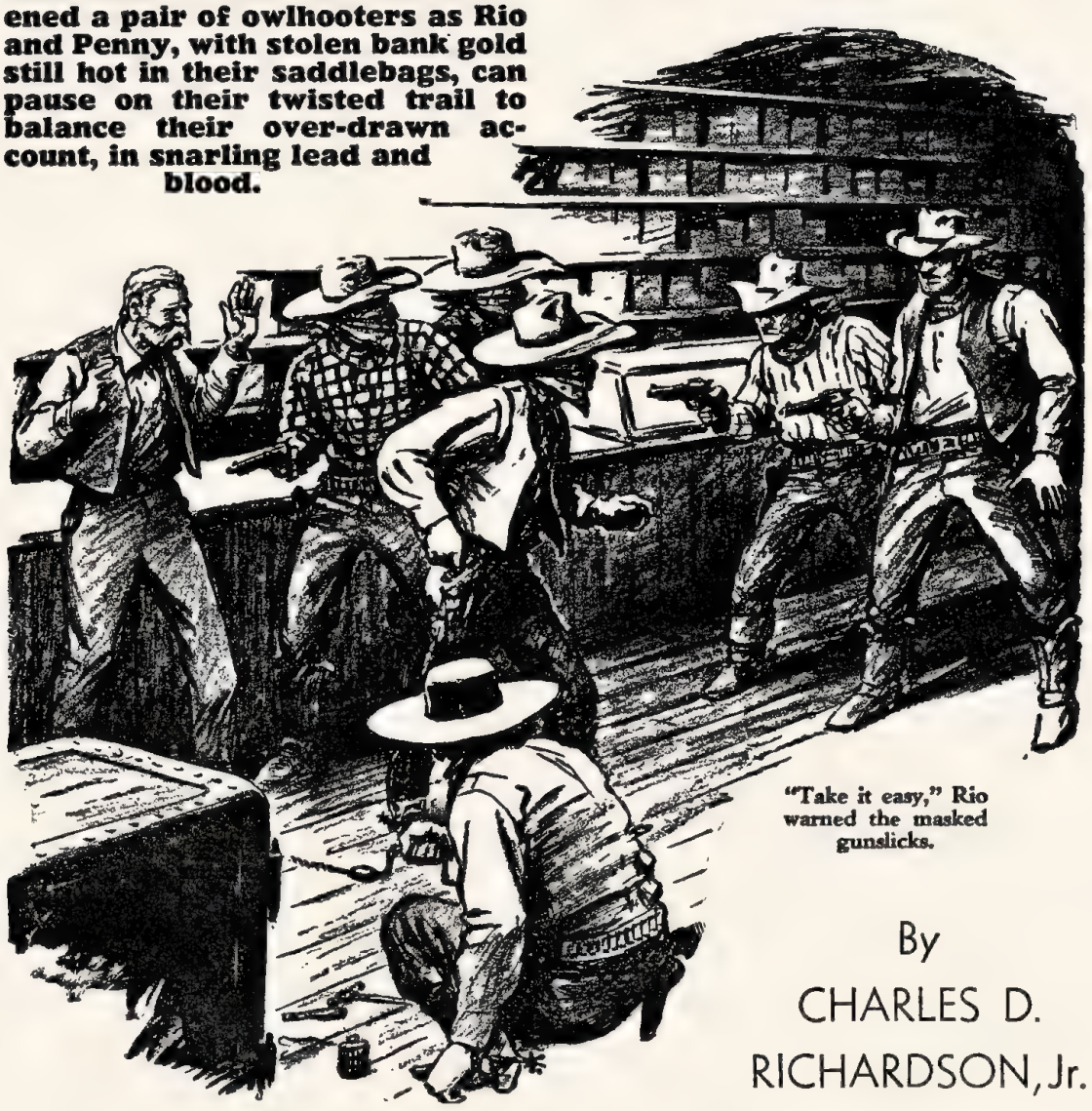
"Good Nesters are Dead Nesters!" by Clifford D. Simak; "Open Season on Sheriffs!" by Thomas Thompson; plus other short stories and fact articles by the West's leading writers.

One More Gun-Chore

Sometimes even as case-hardened a pair of owlhooters as Rio and Penny, with stolen bank gold still hot in their saddlebags, can pause on their twisted trail to balance their over-drawn account, in snarling lead and blood.



"Take it easy," Rio warned the masked gunslicks.

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, Jr.

RIO PAYNE and his pal, Penny Soames, reined in by the moonlit window. With a little stretching they could see inside the Hickock Hardware Emporium. What they saw was not the usual hardware store transactions. A gray-haired man was being held up by four masked gunslicks. Three of the hardcases were covering the man, while the fourth toiled with the safe.

Rio Payne, the flint-faced gent on the dun mustang, grunted. He gave his cartridge belt a hitch.

"Penny," he said, "Them hombres ain't got no sense. You could tell to look at this layout it was slim pickin's. That old boy they're frisking must be the owner. This stickup will probably ruin him."

Penny Soames' gimlet eyes gleamed sharply from his wizened face as he nodded.

"Probably," he said glancing nervously back at the two husky pack burros he and

Payne were leading. "Come on, Rio. It ain't safe for us here!"

The diminutive horseman stared at his partner with a growing frown. Sure as rain, Penny Soames knew that Rio would be suggesting next that they throw in with that helpless gent and clean out the gun-slicks who were robbing him.

That, Soames knew, would be a damn fool trick. Especially since he and Rio were nothing less than bandits themselves. Cautious by nature, Penny couldn't see the sense of attracting attention, despite their innocent getup, and the fact that the money they'd taken from the last bank snuggled securely in the flour sack on one of the little burros.

Rio Payne was drawing his six-shooter. "The old guy'll never let them skunks bust off without a fuss. He'll stab for his iron, and it'll be the last stab he'll ever make. Penny, you and me are going to convince them gunmen of the sinfulness of their ways."

He ground-hitched his horse.

Cursing softly, Soames followed his partner up the store steps. Experience had taught him the futility of arguing, once an idea got a toehold in Rio's stubborn head. Rio Payne had a funny creed. It was okay for him and Penny to frisk banks and such —they'd been given a raw deal by the law once—but as for deliberately robbing a gent who couldn't stand it, that was wrong in his books. In all their years of outlawry, Rio and Penny had never killed a man unjustly.

SO WITH the bleak hope that they'd finish things before the town awoke, Soames dogged Payne's silent bootheels into the Hickock Hardware Emporium.

The two men had almost reached the counter, when a board squeaked under Penny's foot. In the packed silence, the noise sounded like a cougar's squall. The four masked hombres pivoted.

"Take it easy," Rio Payne calmly hefted the gun in his hand. "And drop them hog-legs. You—" he nodded at the white-faced storeman, now coloring with revived hope —"get a mess o' rope and tie 'em up. Me and my partner'll hold 'em off until—"

The slab-faced gent on the left made a wild swipe for his gun. He got the weapon half-clear of leather, then he was sinking with one of Rio Payne's slugs in his chest. But his act was a touch-off for the rest. In a group, the remaining gunmen slammed lead at the pair before them.

Smiling faintly, Rio Payne triggered and another gunny folded. Rio always smiled when he was in a tight spot. It was because of the old scar near the center of his mouth. When his lips tightened, the pull of the scar made them twist upwards. It made folks figure that Rio Payne liked to kill.

Gunblasts shook the floor again, and Penny Soames went down on one knee. The little man's own gun bucked, and the bandit who had creased him fell. Rio then fired from the hip at the gent by the safe.

The masked man gave a funny little snort, sat down as if he had suddenly become tired. His sixgun slid from his listless fingers.

The tall storeowner hurried about the counter.

"That was close," he said huskily. "Gents, you sure saved my bacon to-night. My life savings is in that safe. Been just too bad if them skunks got away with it. Here, let me shake yore hand. Jim Crocker's the name, and if there's any way I can ever repay you, just sing out."

Rio Payne's lips grinned as much as the scar would permit. He took the proffered hand.

"Skip it," he said. "Any man would of done as much." He gave his own name as Tom Sackett, Penny simply as "Dusty".

Penny saw a heavy-set man with a star on his cowhide vest enter the store. He gave Rio a prod with his elbow.

"Trouble," he whispered. "I hope to hell you're satisfied."

Rio Payne's face didn't change as the sheriff's eyes travelled from the dead bandit to his own. He knew that Penny was cursing inwardly. Rio couldn't blame him. Their best bet was to ease out as soon as possible, before the badge-toter started asking too many questions.

"Sorry, gents," Rio said, after Jim Crocker had introduced them to Sheriff Patterson, "but we got to be going. Want to reach the Sundance while the moon's up. Somebody else might beat us to the pay-dirt. Once a prospector, always a prospector, yuh know."

Sheriff Matt Patterson was studying the pair carefully. He statrted to speak, but was

interrupted by the excited storekeeper.

"You fellows," the hardware store owner said decisively, grabbing Rio and Penny by the arms, "are bunkin' at my place tonight." He grinned as Penny tried to free himself. "Won't take no for an answer. The gold'll wait, till after tomorrow's breakfast."

He turned to the lawman who, with the help of several others attracted by the gun fire were dragging out the bodies of the late bandits.

"See you in the morning, Matt. By gosh, wait'll Ma hears about this. And little Tim. Hot tunket! I ain't mad at nobody."

The sheriff's gaze was on the trio as they left the store.

MA CROCKER proved to be a ruddy-cheeked, blue-eyed woman. She smiled warmly as her husband told of the fight in the store.

At the head of the second floor hall, Rio and Penny ran into a small boy walking slowly toward them. The kid's faded blue eyes squinted through his overhanging red hair.

"That you, Pop?" he asked anxiously. "I heard shots an'—"

Jim Crocker came up, placed an affectionate hand on the button's shoulder. Jim's lean throat was lumped as he looked at Rio and Penny.

"Tim's sight ain't so good," he explained quickly, "Ever since birth. The doc says it could be fixed. Operation by a big surgeon. Some day I hope to be able to do just that." Briefly, he informed the boy of the frustrated robbery. "And if Tom an' Dusty hadn't of come in when they did," he finished, "Your old pop mightn't be here to tuck you in at night."

"Gosh!" Tim Crocker's face was glowing. "Gosh-all to Judas! Pop, lemme sleep with Tom and Dusty! I'll bet they got yarns to spill that'd raise yer hair. I'll bet—"

Jim Crocker laughed, gave the kid a spank. "And *I'll* bet you'd keep 'em awake half the night, pesterin' to hear more. Come on, button, you're bunkin' with me. You can get yore fill of yarns in the morning. G'night, boys. Get a good rest."

It didn't take Rio and Penny long to hit the welcome softness of the beds Ma Crocker had prepared for them. It was like falling into a corner of Heaven, after the hard ground in the open they'd put up with for months. Penny Soame's hacksaw snores rose almost immediately.

Rio couldn't fall asleep that easily. His flint eyes stared up at the moonpatches on the ceiling, reflected from the big mirror in the corner. He was thinking of the half-blind kid he'd met, and how Jim Crocker's face had clouded when he'd told of the affliction. Rio's thoughts swiveled to the two grand buried in the flour sack in the Crocker stable. It wouldn't take all of that money to make Timmy's eyes good once again.

The sun was hot in his face when he awoke. The room about him was jogging crazily, due to the way Penny Soames was shaking him.

"Get up, you big moose," Penny was panting. "Doggone it, we gotta clear out of here quick!"

Rio slid reluctantly from the covers. "Yeah?" he yawned. "How come?"

"The sheriff!" Penny Soames snorted. The little man made sure the door was closed. "Listen, Rio, that lawdog's downstairs now, waiting in the parlor for breakfast. Says he just come over to sample some o' Ma's flapjacks. You know danged well that ain't the real reason. Patterson's here because he's got something on us and is afraid we'll skip before he can prove it. Dammit, Rio, I told you we never shoulda come near Hickok!"

Rio dressed thoughtfully. Once again it looked like the cautious Penny might be right. But the thing was done, no use beefing about it now.

"Take it easy, Penny, and wipe that worried look off your pan. We're going down to breakfast. We can't leave now. That would give Patterson reason enough to be suspicious."

The stocky Soames followed his partner into the hall. He was cursing quietly to himself.

IN THE plain little dining room, Ma Crocker had extended the table an extra leaf. Jim Crocker sat at the head, fork in hand. Before him teetered a stack of smoking brown pancakes. As Rio and Penny slid into their chairs, Jim gave a relieved snort.

"You just made it," he grinned. "Another second and I'd of made off with all

these here stovelids myself. Hurry up, Ma! We kin start now."

Ma Crocker bustled in from the kitchen, and the flapjack plate whirled enthusiastically around the table. Matt Patterson, pouring a sticky stream of molasses on his cakes, looked across at Rio Payne.

"I was just telling Jim," he said, "about the way this country's going to the dogs. Holdups, rustlings bustin' out every whichway. Only last Saturday, I read of two gents friskin' the Sagetown National. Got away with a cool two thousand. One of the skunks was a big hombre, had kinda a redlike scar."

Penny Soames' flapjack plunked into his coffee. The little man got a sudden fit of coughing.

"No end to what some snakes'll go these days," Jim Crocker said.

"They can't get away with it forever," the sheriff reminded. "The authorities at Sagetown are sending out posters to every town in the county. I'm expectin' mine any day now."

Rio Payne finished his meal in silence. He didn't have to look at Penny Soames to know what he was thinking. He knew they were in a hell of a spot. Sheriff Patterson's suspicions bristled on his face like quills on a porcupine.

Payne nudged his partner and the pair edged into the hallway. They were almost to the front door when the lawman strode up to them.

"Leaving so soon?" Patterson queried keenly. "I was in hopes you boys would stay over a spell. I could use a coupla fast guns in my posse. The polecats you fanned down last night are only a part of a big gang I'm after."

Crocker came into the hall then. His lean face was anxious.

"Stay on, why don'tcha, fellas," he urged. "No trouble for Ma an' me, and I shore would breathe easier. I got a hunch that gang will be out for blood, once they hear of how four of their members got laid cold. They'll probably make another stab at my store, hopin' to slug you two. With Matt here and his posse, an' you two besides, we can fix their clocks pronto."

Penny Soames had gone a little pale. "I dunno, Jim. We ought to get on. That gold we—*Ouch!*"

Rio's boottip slid back from Penny's ankle. He shot the other a withering glance.

"Reckon we can work it," he told the lawman. "Seeing as how Jim's been so white. Just whistle when you need us, and we'll come a runnin'."

The kid Tim gave a warwhoop. "Hot spit! Now I'll get to hear them hair-raisers!" He felt for Rio's sleeve and clutched at it gleefully.

Penny Soames waited until he and Rio had reached the privacy of the stable, then he exploded.

"You dang nitwit!" he grated. "Why in hell did you go and promise that for? It's plain as day that's what Patterson wanted. That lawdog's trying to stall us until he can get them reward posters which prove we're the ones who robbed the Sagetown National. Rio, you're listening to me this time. We're lamming out of this berg now!"

He hurriedly flung his hull on the jughead mare.

Payne was looking at the flour sack leaning innocently in the straw. The sack which held two thousand dollars in ten,

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twenty, and fifty dollar bills. Rio's lips curled a little.

"To-night, Penny," he corrected quietly, "Not before. Patterson would slap us in the jug sure, if he was to see us leave. Check up on them cinches. I'm going back in the house and have a chat with Tim."

THE moon was a sullen pumpkin in the east when Rio Payne got up from the parlor sofa. He'd just finished telling young Tim another hair-raiser, and as the outlaw helped the boy across the floor, he noticed Penny Soames in the doorway. Penny was working nervously on his quirley butt.

"See yuh outside, Rio," he said shortly.

Rio watched Ma Crocker take the kid upstairs, then he slipped silently into the growing dusk. Penny was a lumpy shadow on the porch stoop. He was girding his holster belt about him. "Got everything down to the stable," he told Rio in a low voice. "Hosses saddled an' waitin'. Let's get out of here. I'm jittery as a broomtail with the hives."

Payne nodded, and the two of them hurried down the gravel path. Dark clouds plushed the moon now, and the town of Hickok was a huddle of indistinct shapes.

They trotted quietly away from the Crocker home. Through the kitchen window, Rio could see Jim Crocker fussing around.

Halfway up Hickock's inky mainstreet, Rio Payne reined in his mustang. He didn't look at Penny Soames as he began searching through his clothes.

"Dammit," he mumbled, "I left my hogleg back at Jim's. Gotta get it. You wait here with the burros."

He unhitched the rope to his pack animal, rode back down the street before Soames could speak.

In the cover of a line of thick maples, Rio drew near the Crocker house. He hoped Penny hadn't seen him when he'd dropped back a little and thrust his hand into the flour sack on the burro. Rio had grabbed all the money near the top of the powdery flour—his share of the loot. Penny's half, the other one thousand, lay on the bottom. Pockets bulging, Rio dismounted, made for the now darkened kitchen window.

It took him less than five minutes to crawl inside, leave the money with a scribbled note on the table where Jim would be sure to find it, and ease out again to his horse.

With another look at the comfortable little house, Rio spurred rapidly through the gloom for the waiting Penny. As he went, he put the six-shooter from where he'd hidden it in his shirt, back in its holster.

Penny Soames' face had the hue of charcoal as Rio dusted up.

"I often wonder," the short man choked, "why I put up with you. Rio, you could of let the dang iron go. Wasted ten minutes or so. We could of been well out of town by now."

Payne clamped his jaws and rode on. In silence, the pair moved toward the woods fringing Hickok.

They had just reached it, when the drum of distant hoofbeats sounded. Turning, Rio made out a knot of masked riders skittering like grim phantoms across the prairie. There were at least five of them, and they had their guns in their hands.

They were making straight for Jim Crocker's house at the opposite end of town.

Penny Soames checked his horse. "Hijackers!"

Rio Payne gulped. They were gun slicks, in all likelihood the rest of the gang from which Rio and Penny had sliced a part. The hombres evidently had found out where the two outlaws were staying, were now fogging up to wipe them out. Rio Payne, thinking of the thousand dollars on the kitchen table, groaned.

He pulled his gun. "Penny! Jim and Timmy—"

Soames was already spurring. "I know," he said dryly. "The kid and his ma might be hurt, Jim's been white, and—come on, let's get it over with."

Leaving the burros ground-hitched in a cedar patch, they rode out directly in front of the oncoming horsemen. The masked riders didn't check their pace. "Get the hell outta the road," the big man in the lead whipped.

The moon, now unshackled of its cloud screen, bathed the pair sharply. It gleamed on the guns Rio and Penny were raising. One of the bandit gang to the left gasped.

"It must be the gents we're after! Give it to 'em!"

The rest needed little urging. Gunfire sliced out at Penny and Rio. Payne grunted as a bullet cut along his side. He fired quickly into the masked faces. He saw one man drop, a second buckle and pitch on his face. Then another slug from the bandits made Rio's left arm useless.

A gasp from Penny Soames announced that he, too, was hit. Tight-lipped, the little man gripped a bleeding shoulder. "Got to light out, Rio," he rasped.

It wasn't because of the bandits. Only two of them remained and they were already fleeing. Spinning, Rio saw the sheriff and his posse dusting up the street toward them. Rio joined Penny in a wild dash for the woods.

They didn't look back. As the welcome cover of the trees enveloped them, they hurried to the waiting burros, removed what they needed, including the precious flour sack, and galloped on down the narrow trail.

THEY covered five miles before either spoke. Slowing to a jog trot, Penny Soames looked at Rio Payne in a way that made the latter squirm.

"Well?" Rio jerked finally, "Spill it. Tell me what a damn fool I am, and all that goes with it."

Penny shook his head. "I'm through preachin'. I've palled with you long enough to know you can't keep your nose outta other gunfights. But that ain't what I want to talk about. It's that two grand of ours. Rio, I—uh—"

Rio nodded. He stopped his horse and faced the other squarely.

"I know," he said quietly. "You're going to say it's a good thing we still got the dough, that we don't need to worry about our next meal. But that's where you're wrong, Penny. We ain't got no two grand, only half of it. I took the other part back to Jim's, to keep his kid's lights from going out."

Rio Payne's hand was on his gun, and he moved back a little. Soames was still staring queerly with those gimlet eyes of his. "If you don't like it," Rio added grimly, "you can go for your gun. I'd do it again for the kid, if I had to."

Penny Soames seemed to be struggling for breath. "Rio," he mumbled, suddenly breaking into a hoarse laugh, "Rio Payne. Take a squint in that flour sack of ours and tell me what you find."

Puzzled, Rio snatched the sack from behind his cantle, ripped it open. Pawed around in the flour, then upended the sack in the air. The flour sifted down in a miniature snowstorm.

Of the remaining thousand—Penny's share of the loot—not a trace!

Penny Soames now was laughing spasmodically. "Not a cent, Rio. Not a damn cent. We're broke clean. The dough—it's all back at Jim's. Before we left tonight, I put my share on the dresser in our room. I—the kid—Hell, Rio, we're a pair of softies!"

Rio Payne didn't comment. But he quickly reached over and grabbed Penny's hand and squeezed it hard. Somehow, deep inside of him, Rio had a feeling that they were through stealing for ever. They'd find work, somewhere, with another swell gent like Jim Crocker. Maybe sometime they'd hear about little Tim and how he liked his new world of light. It was nice to think about.

And back in Hickok, a sheriff was watching thoughtfully the place in the woods where two outlaws had melted. He and his posse had just captured the remaining bandit trio. Jim Crocker, standing beside the lawman, grunted.

"Can't figure it," he said. "Tom and Dusty lightin' out like that. They didn't say they was expectin' a raid to-night. And I hadn't a chance to thank them for all that money they left. Matt, do you reckon it was a mistake? Mebbe we ought to ride after them and—"

Sheriff Matt Patterson was feeling in his pocket. Into the bright moonlight he drew a crumpled paper, the reward dodger and pictures of Rio Payne and Penny Soames which had come by special rider just before sundown. Patterson idly crimped the paper, tore it into fine bits.

"You read Tom's note," he told Jim Crocker. "Jim, them prospectors is queer ducks. They don't make a habit of handing over their paydirt unless they think mighty fine of a gent. Go on back to bed, Jim, and dream about the kid gettin' back his sight. Me, I reckon I'm going to sleep plumb swell tonight."

By
MARTIN
DE VRIES

"Slide down," Steve ordered, "or taste some hot lead!"

THE WINDMILL WAR

With his shrewd and scheming brain, sewed-up water rights, and a stranger's hired guns, Jess Truro figured he was a natural to become the big auger of the Rogue Hills range. . . . But he forgot that one man's bull-headed stubbornness might serve as adequate armor even against bushwhack bullets!

IT all happened quite suddenly. Probably the wind shifted, and caught the bladed wheel just right, setting it in motion. Steve Hocking claimed later it was Buster's fault, but Buster swore he hadn't had anything to do with it. In fact, he was watching a rider coming toward them, and then when he looked up again, there was Steve, with the rear of his britches hooked into the windmill blade, getting lifted clear of the platform on which he had been standing.

Steve let out a wild yell, but it didn't

stop the thing. He went around twice, paddling air like a buzzard trying to land, and then, the third time around, he caught onto the platform with both hands and hung on for dear life. The blade kept going, searing his leg from hip to calf, and let him go. He was scared stiff, and by the time he dared to maneuver around, and come down, the rider had arrived, and stood watching.

"Damn all machinery," Steve flared. "I'd have broke my neck if that thing'd let go at the wrong time. Balls of Fire, Buster, don't ever do that again."

"I didn't do anything," Buster objected, mildly.

"What made it go 'round then?"

"I dunno."

"Why don't you? You claim to know all about machinery."

"Once in a while," Buster explained, solemnly, "a windmill just gets a notion." He was quiet, and soft-spoken. He had worked on Steve Hocking's Wildgoose spread less than a month, and liked it fine. He liked his boss and he knew Steve was just letting off steam to quiet his nerves.

"Damned funny thing," Steve grumbled. "Anyway, as I see it, we got to go to town, an' git some new gears. That's what's wrong with it, and we might as well go now as later."

"This Gil Foley's place?" The stranger had ridden in closer to put his question.

Steve straightened up, and looked the rider over. What he saw didn't impress him. Scars writhed across the man's face, and his eyes had a cold, steely look. He looked like a candidate for the calabozo, but that was none of Steve's affair. "Yeah," he answered, "this is Gil's place, but he ain't here."

Steve was Gil's neighbor. When the water holes on his place dried up, like they had now, Steve got his water from Gil. Gil had tapped into an underground stream, and had set up three windmills, one for himself one for Steve so he could pipe water down to his tanks, and the third for Jess Truro, who neighbored him on the other side. It worked out fine, except that Steve's mill was always getting out of whack. "Gil ain't here," he went on. "He got himself elected sheriff, an' he's in town celebratin'."

"I'm his new deputy," the stranger announced. "My name's Sempline—Seco Sempline."

Steve was surprised. "Didn't know he hired a new deputy," he remarked. "He only got himself elected yesterday. He works purty fast."

"He probably knowed he was goin' to git elected. Is that Jess Truro's place up the valley there?"

Steve nodded. "There's just the three of us in a row—Truro, Gill, an' myself."

"You look pinched in. Any trouble?"

"No. We get along all right." He moved back to the well. "You'll find Gil in town, probably at Crab's Mercantile."

"Celebratin' there?"

"I guess so."

"Chewin' candy sticks?"

"I wouldn't know. Probably, just chewin' the fat. He likes to talk, but he don't drink."

The stranger swung his horse around. "Well, if you git snarled up in that thing again, just call on me. I'll git out a posse," were his parting words.

"Damned smart-aleck," Steve grumbled.

"SEEMS as if I've seen that hombre before, but I couldn't say where," Buster remarked. He paused a moment then added, "Look what I found down there, Steve. That pipe's busted. No wonder we ain't gettin' any water. It's busted clear off."

Steve looked down into the well. "How could that happen?"

"Not very easy, unless somebody took a sledge-hammer to it."

"What's that way down in there? It shines."

"I dunno," Buster said. "I'll see." He let his feet down, and slid into the narrow bricked-up hole. "Gosh it's cool down in here."

"What is it?"

"Throw a rope and haul me up. I got it." Buster called out.

It was a small pocket mirror he had found. Steve frowned. Months ago when they had been good friends, Steve and Archie Foley, Gil's boy, used to signal with mirrors, back and forth across the valley. They had worked out a code, and could send messages to each other. Archie used to get a big bang out of it, but, lately, he had given it up. He had gotten into some kind of kid trouble and fought shy of Steve. But it was his mirror, and the only thing it could mean was that it was Archie who

had taken the sledge hammer to the pipe.

Steve slipped it into his pocket, and looked up suddenly. There was a small shack where Gil kept his tools less than thirty feet away. And just as Steve looked up, he saw a head jerk back out of sight. It was Archie. He could move faster than a wild horse, but the shimmer of his black hair was a dead give-away.

Steve winked at Buster, and started to move, circling toward the shack. He went in on tiptoe, and then made a quick rush. He almost collared the boy, too, but not quite. Archie jerked away and ran, and five minutes later Steve saw him riding his horse toward town, cutting a wide circle as he crossed the valley. "Danged kid oughta be whupped," he muttered. "Come on, Buster, we'll go in, too. See if we can git some new pipe."

IT was past midday, the sun was now blazing. Steve's frown grew blacker. It was really Gil's business to keep the mills in working order, but Gil had been too busy electioneering, and, now that he'd won, it would probably get even worse. With a ranch to run, Gil had no right to run Jerry Oldham out of his job, but Jess Truro had prodded him into running. He scanned the sun-wracked valley with the two drift-fences running crosswise, and his eyes settled morosely on the bunch of stock, milling and bawling around the empty tanks. They were already suffering. The tanks were only a makeshift to carry through the dry spells. It was rain they needed, and, from the looks of the sky, they weren't going to get any.

Steve, as usual, rode his big bay gelding. Buster rode beside him on a little paint. They rode fast because that water trouble gnawed at Steve so hard.

"If Archie did it, Buster," Steve muttered, "Gil's got to be told, that's all, an' I hate to do it."

From the way it looked, he's goin' to try to head us off."

"He's been givin' Gil an' Judy a lot of trouble lately. Judy's his sister."

"Yeah, I know." Buster kept his eyes straight ahead. He knew that Judy was more to Steve than just Archie's sister.

They reached the draw where hard-pan showed along the edges, and the walls built up sheer and high. Steve always cut through the draw when he went to town. Buster said something about Gil's new deputy, wondering how he had gotten hold of him. "He must be a total stranger in these parts."

"He looked like a downright salty character. Got a lot of lip, too."

Buster suddenly pulled up. "Balls of Fire, Steve! I know who he is. It just came to me. What'd he call himself?"

Seco Sempline."

"That ain't his name. The last time I saw him he called himself—" Buster suddenly lurched in the saddle. Steve gave him a side glance, waiting for him to finish, but the words stuck in Buster's throat. His head suddenly sagged. A black splotch of blood formed on his shirt, and the sound of the rifle that had put it there rattled through the draw.

Buster got out a few more words. "—tough gun hawk—Frisco George—" Then he jack-knifed forward and thudded to the ground.

JESS TRURO was rolling some poker dice in Paddy Nick's Empire Bar just to see what he could throw. The bar bottle and a drained glass stood beside him. Paddy watched with a sleepy eye. He was a good judge of men, and he didn't like Truro. There was nothing he could put his finger on. He just had a feeling. Even the way Truro corraled the dice in his hand made him think of a snake crawling up on a fear-stricken frog. But it was his business to be genial to customers, so he remarked, by way of conversation, that he didn't think Gil Foley would make as good a sheriff as Jerry Oldman had.

"Hell, man, you don't know what you're talkin' about," Truro told him, roughly.

Paddy shrugged. "I say what I think. Not that he'll have any trouble. Rogue Hills ain't a tough town."

At that moment the batwing doors swung open, and Seco Sempline walked in. He ordered a drink, and asked Paddy where he could find Jess Truro. Paddy silently pointed his thumb.

"I want to talk with him," Seco said pointedly. "If you ain't too nosey."

"Not at all," Paddy said, moving away, "not at all."

Truro and Seco looked over each other carefully. "Maybe you're Gil Foley's new

deputy," Truro finally hazarded, moving toward him.

Seco shrugged. "Mebbe. Mebbe not. I got yore letter. I don't mind takin' a whack at it, if the sign's right."

Together, they moved to a corner table. "There'll be more in it than deputy's wages," Truro assured him.

"So you said in yore letter. I kept it just in case you might try to crawl."

Truro laughed, but he didn't look amused. "You don't know me, Seco. You better git rid of that letter pronto."

"Glad to," Seco agreed, "soon as I git paid."

"Hell, you ain't done anything yet."

"No. What yuh got in mind?"

Truro spread his elbows along the table edge. "I s'pose you came through the valley?"

Seco nodded. "Yeah. It's a right purty place."

"That valley's what I aim to get. I've got only a piece of it now, but I aim to get it all. I want to throw it all together, an' make one big outfit—mine."

"Where do I come in?"

Truro spilled it all, and what he said made even Seco sit up and take notice. He meant to get the valley from end to end for his own, but he wanted more than that. He wanted Judy Foley, too, and his snakey mind had worked out a sure way. "I'll git Hocking's place, regardless. I got him on the run right now, but I don't want to show my hand anywhere along the line, because of the girl."

"She favors him, eh?" Seco remarked shrewdly.

"She won't when I git through," Truro scowled.

"You mean when I git through, don't yuh." Seco laughed. "Damned if I ever played Cupid before, but I kin take a whack at that, too."

Truro leaned closer. "I got a way of puttin' pressure on Gil's boy, Archie. He does what I tell him to, an' he's runnin' Hocking ragged with that damned windmill. When Hocking gits wise to him—and he will when I get ready to let him, because I planted some evidence against Archie down in that well—there'll be hell to pay—for Archie. Hocking's liable to gut-shoot

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him." His lips curled momentarily into a sinister grin. "You see what I mean?"

"You mean," Seco guessed, "Hocking's sparkin' the button's sister, so he don't gut-shoot him a-tall. I do it for him, eh?"

Truro nodded.

"AN' then," Seco added, "bein' as how I'm deputy sheriff, I go out an' try to arrest Hocking for murder. Only he won't come along to the calabozo, an' I got to shoot him down f'r resistin' an officer. That's a nice clean picture, Truro. Nice clean work."

"You'll git paid."

"I sure will," Seco assured him. "By the way, Truro, I just came past Foley's place. Hocking an' one of his hands was working on the mill—a young feller by the name of Buster King. He knowed me. He comes from up yonderly, same as me. He knew who I was.

Truro swore. "Dammit, man, then he's got to be taken care of before he—"

Seco grinned, but his gray steely eyes didn't change expression. "It's been done, Truro. I shot him off his hoss, down in the draw."

Truro eased up, and got up. "We'll go over an' git you sworn in. Gil knows about you. I got him into office, an' I told him all I wanted was to pick him a good man f'r deputy so I could be sure the office 'd be run right."

"You're quite a thinker," Seco said.

They headed for the door, but before they reached it, Archie Foley rushed in, carrying a big head of steam. He was like a whizzer on a stick, thin, and dark, and quick-eyed. "I gotta see you, Jess," he cried. "There's hell to pay. We gotta do somethin'."

"Now don't git excited, Kid."

"I got reason." He glanced swiftly at Seco. "I gotta see you alone, right now."

"All right. You wait out here, Seco. I'll be with you right off."

They went back, and Archie blurted out what had happened at the windmill. "Buster went down in, an' found my old pocket mirror. I was watchin'. I heard 'em talkin'. You gotta do somethin', or I—I'll go tell him the whole thing, how you put me up to it."

"I wouldn't do that, Archie," Truro stated, his eyes narrowing. "It wouldn't be healthy. You better do just what I say—nothin' more, or I'll have you thrown in the jug. An' Gil's the one who'd have to do it. You wouldn't want to put a job like that onto him, would you?"

Archie stirred restlessly. "You jobbed me, Jess, I know that now. I never did nothin' wrong. You stole Steve's beef, an' made it look like I did it so you could put the pressure on me. You got me into a damn' beartrap, because you hate Steve Hocking's guts, an' now I can't git out." His voice was getting shrill and shakey. He looked like he was close to the end of his rope.

Truro's face twitched. "I ought to turn you in right here an' now, dammit," he stated, angrily. "You can't say anything like that about me. You better not. I'm tellin' you somethin', Archie. You got more than a rustlin' deal hangin' around your neck now."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"About Buster King. He's dead, Archie. An' you bushwhacked him, down in the draw."

Archie sucked in his breath. "Dead! You're a liar."

"Take it easy, Archie. You wouldn't want Paddy to hear. I got a man who saw it done." He pointed his thumb. "That man out there. He was telling me about it."

"It's a lie. I never—"

"Steve's lookin' for you, Archie. He'll gut-shoot you the minute he sets eyes on you. You better git a gun, boy, an' be ready when he comes at you."

"My God!" The words came out like a sharp gust of wind, like a tortured death cry.

"The thing for you to do, Archie, is to git back home. I'll tell Steve I saw you headin' south. But if he should be suspicious, an' show up there, let him have it, the way you did Buster. Then hit the trail, an' keep goin'."

"I won't do it. I—" his voice slanted down to a whisper and he staggered out.

DOC FROST said that Buster would probably pull through.

"Whew!" Steve let go. "I've been sittin' here all afternoon holdin' my breath."

"How'd it happen?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Well, he sure had a close call."

"I gotta go see Gil, Doc. I'll stop in again later."

The day was near gone, but it was still hot and sultry. Steve walked past Crab's merchantile, but Gil wasn't there. Judy was, though. She came outside when she saw him. She was dark, like Archie, and there was fire in her eyes, too. After their mother's death, she had helped raise Archie, and always fended for him, but, lately, Archie had gone his lone wolf ways. Steve knew it worried her.

Steve nodded and then asked her, "Judy, will you take a walk with me. I'd like to talk with you. "

She came down the steps, and took hold of his hand the way she always did. "What's wrong, Steve?"

"It's about Archie. I was going to tell Gil, but I don't think I should. He gits so hot under the collar."

A worried look settled in her eyes. "What about Archie?"

Steve told her. He showed her the mirror. "I tried to collar him, but he lit out. He came toward town, but I haven't seen him around. Buster and I rode in to get some new pipe for the mill. When we got to the draw, somebody was waiting there for us with a rifle. Buster got shot. I got him at Doc Frost's now. He had a close call."

"Steve—Archie didn't do that."

"I don't know, Judy. Maybe that bullet was meant for me. If it was, it must've been Archie. Nobody else around here's got it in for me."

"Steve, you had some stock stolen a while back."

Steve started, and gave her a quick look. Then he said: "Just some drifter or other ran it off, Judy. It didn't amount to much."

Judy shook her head. "You trailed him, Steve, and you found out it was Archie. At least, it was Archie's horse. That's the reason you never tried to clear it up."

"You don't know what you're talkin' about, Judy," Steve grumbled.

"Yes, I do."

"Anyway, it hasn't got anything to do with this. I don't want any trouble with Archie. He's hot-headed, just like Gil, and there's no telling what a ruckus would end up in. I don't want to risk it, because—well, because of you."

Judy smiled gently. "I've had to raise Archie, Steve. I tried my best. Maybe I loved him too much. Maybe he loves me too much. One time Jess Truro came over, and asked me to marry him. Archie heard it. He told Jess to get off the place, and stay off, and he had a scattergun in his hands to back it up. He told Jess I was going to marry Steve Hocking, and nobody else." Judy hesitated a moment, then she went on, her voice steady and clear; "I never denied it, Steve."

"When was that?"

"A long time ago."

"Why didn't Archie tell me?"

"I told him not to."

"Come on, let's go tell Gil."

"Tell him what?"

"That you and I are going to get married."

LIGHTS were going on. The sheriff's office was up beyond the Empire Bar. Paddy Nicks was out on the porch, getting some air. He waved his hand as they passed by.

"Paddy,"—Steve stopped a moment—"Judy and I are going to get married."

"That so?" Paddy answered. "Well, the best of luck to the both of you. By the way, Judy, Archie was in here a while back, talkin' to Jess Truro."

"Oh."

"He was boilin' over about somethin', but I couldn't hear what was said. I thought maybe you'd like to know."

"Thanks, Paddy."

"Hope Gil makes out alright, but I don't think he will. Tell him I wish he'd stuck to ranching."

"I'll do that, Paddy."

Gil's office faced the street. He was sitting at a roll-top desk. Jess Truro and the new deputy were there with him. Gil said he had just gotten through with his first official act of swearing Seco in. "It's a big load off'n my mind, too," he muttered. "I need somebody around here who kin handle a gun. I feel just like I was straddlin' a boilin eruption pit, Steve."

"You'll git used to it, Gil."

"I never expected to get here, that's sure. Jess' forty-rod whiskey, an' his bad cigars did it." Gil was short and bow-legged, saddle-marked for good, and he talked a lot, but he was an honest and upright man.

"You let Seco do the dirty work for a

while, Gil," Jess advised him. "He kin handle it. I'll vouch for him."

"Soon as I heard I got elected, I spent some time shootin' at a tin can. Shot off a whole danged box of cartridges, an' never hit it once. Wouldn't I look nice standin' up to some tough road agent, or some ornery cow thief."

"I've got some work for you right now, Gil," Steve said, suddenly frowning. "Buster got shot this afternoon."

Gil jumped. "No!"

Steve nodded. "Bushwhacked. I took him in to Doc Frost's. He had a mighty close call."

There was a tense silence. Steve felt Jess' eyes on him, Seco's too, but he didn't look.

"Got any idea who done it, Steve!" Gil snapped out.

Steve hesitated a moment, looking at Judy. Then he said: "No idea at all."

"Hell, Steve, you should have told me right off. Now we'll have to wait til mornin'."

"I wanted to stay with him," Steve continued. "Just before he got shot, he was goin' to tell me somethin', an' I thought maybe I could get it out of him when he came to."

"What was that?" Jess asked.

"It didn't make much sense. He started to tell me somethin' about a man he called Frisco. That's all I heard, but I'll find out the rest as soon as he comes to." He heard Seco let his breath go, and stir restlessly. He saw Jess and Seco snap glances, and then he saw Jess get up.

"Mind comin' outside a minute, Steve," Jess asked. "I got something to tell you."

Steve got up, and followed Jess. They didn't go further than the porch. "About that shooting, Steve—I know who did it," Jess announced.

"You do?"

"Yeah. I couldn't say anything inside. It's a hell of a note. Archie came in an' talked to me over at Paddy's place. Archie did it, Steve. He meant to get you."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Archie now?"

"I told him to go home. I told him I'd send you out there, and you could settle this damned squabble between you. He's all broke up. You better get out there, or he might do somethin' drastic to himself."

"That's a good idea, Jess. I'll go right now."

"Yeah. You better do that."

Steve started down the street, and Jess went back inside.

"What's Steve goin' to do?" Gil asked.

"He's goin' out to your place, Gil."

"He is?"

"Gil—I don't like to tell you this, but Archie's up to his neck in that shooting. He told me so. Steve's goin' out there to talk to him. He wants to settle their squabble so there won't be any more of it."

"Archie wouldn't do anything like that, Jess."

"I'm just tellin' you what he told me. You know he flies off the handle, Gil."

"You don't s'pose Steve had any notion of usin' any more than just talk to settle it, do you?" Seco put in. "He's carryin' a gun, I notice."

"He wouldn't—" Jess stopped, as if the wind had been knocked right out of him. He put on quite an act, sagging into a chair, and putting his head in his hand. Then, suddenly, he looked up again. "Seco, you better trail out there right away. Don't let them two get into a gun-fight. Steve said right out he'd gut-shoot the little brat, but I didn't put any stock in it. You better hurry, Seco."

SECO went out, but he had no intention of heading out to Gil's place. Not just yet. Nor, for that matter, had Steve. He had thrown out some bait, and he wanted to see what critter came to the trap.

Doc Frosts' place had a picket fence around it. Doc was sitting near the window, smoking his pipe. There was a dim light in the room above the porch where Buster was. The window stood open.

Steve didn't need to wait long. Gil's deputy came in through Doc's vegetable patch. He circled the small house once, then stopped at the porch, and looked up. It wasn't a hard climb, but he had to move quietly because Doc was so close by. He got halfway up the pillar, and then Steve stopped him. "Slide down," he ordered. "I've got you covered."

Seco leaped, straight away from the pillar, like a frog, and landed in the bushes. His gun flamed, and hot lead seared Steve's shoulder. Doc almost jumped through the

window. Steve's gun bucked in his hand, and if the bullet didn't go through Seco, it went through the house. It bucked again, and again, at the dark huddle in the bushes, at the yellow streak of flame in front of it, at the brief glimpse he caught of a snarling face in the lamplight. And then he heard a thudding crash, and the snap and splinter of twigs, and then an eerie silence.

"What the hell you boys tryin' to do—shoot my house down?" Doc roared.

"I guess I got another customer for you, Doc," Steve answered.

Doc threshed through the bushes, and finally came back out. "Not for me, Steve," he said. "Take him down to the undertaker."

Steve searched the late killer and found the note from Truro. It brought his blood to a boil. "Damned skunks!" he muttered. "Truro's goin' to get what Seco did, or else a hang-noose."

JESS was still in the office—with him were Judy and Gil. Steve put the note down on the desk in front of Jess, and backed off. "Read that, Truro," he told him. "I got it off Seco. He made another try to get Buster. Seco, or Frisco George, or whatever his name is no more."

"You—you've got it wrong, Steve. You can't—"

"You're behind this whole thing, Jess. You jobbed Archie with that fake rustling deal. You wanted my place, and you used him to get it."

Truro moved fast. His chair clattered to the wall, and his gun whipped out. He grabbed Judy, and held her inside the iron hoop of his arm, dragging her to the door with him for a shield against Steve's leveled gun. "Damn you, Hocking," he snarled, "you'll git yours. I hate your guts. I always did!"

His gun made a faint click as he brought it to cock. He kicked back, and the door whipped open. Judy kicked and twisted, but she couldn't break his hold. His arm came up, pressing on her throat, and her struggles grew weaker. Steve watched him like a hawk, but he didn't dare risk a shot. Gil's gun hung from the arm of his chair, dangling out of reach. The light flared past Truro, out into the night. Steve's head jerked. His eyes snapped past Truro. "Keep out of this, Archie," he yelled, suddenly. "Look out for Judy."

Truro almost turned. But he caught himself shrewdly, and swung back. "Damned cagey, Hocking, only Archie's out at—"

Archie came up from behind. His fist slammed down on Truro's arm. Quick as light, Archie bored in. Judy slid to the floor. Truro's gun roared, but the shot went wild. Archie caught him another blow, square in the throat. Truro sprawled flat, gagging and retching. He rolled sideways, across the porch, out of the light. Steve rushed him. Their guns roared, pointblank. Yellow flame licked Steve's legs. Truro got on his knees. Savage oaths poured over his twisting lips. He took both hands to his gun for a final shot, but he never got it off. He started to sag, still fighting it off. But it got him all of a sudden. His head whipped down, and he took a dive off the porch. Steve heard his neck snap as he hit the ground, and he holstered his gun, and went back inside.

STEVE sat on the corral fence at his Wildgoose spread the next day, watching the fanning windmills over at Gil's place. It was a far stretch, but his eyes caught the glint of the blades as they flashed in the sun, and the mournful sound of his stock milling around the tanks had stopped.

Hank Withers rode up. Steve had sent him in to ask about Buster. "He's okey, boss," Hank announced. "I even chewed the fat with him a while. I told him what a gun-shootin' hombre you turned out to be."

Steve grinned wryly, then, suddenly his eyes lifted. Hank followed his look. Halfway up the far windmill there was a new glint that struck down on them with sharp precision. "Come on over," Archie was signalling. "Judy's home. I'll clear out."

Steve slid down. "Let me take your horse, Hank. I'm goin' over to Gil's place awhile. I'll be right back."

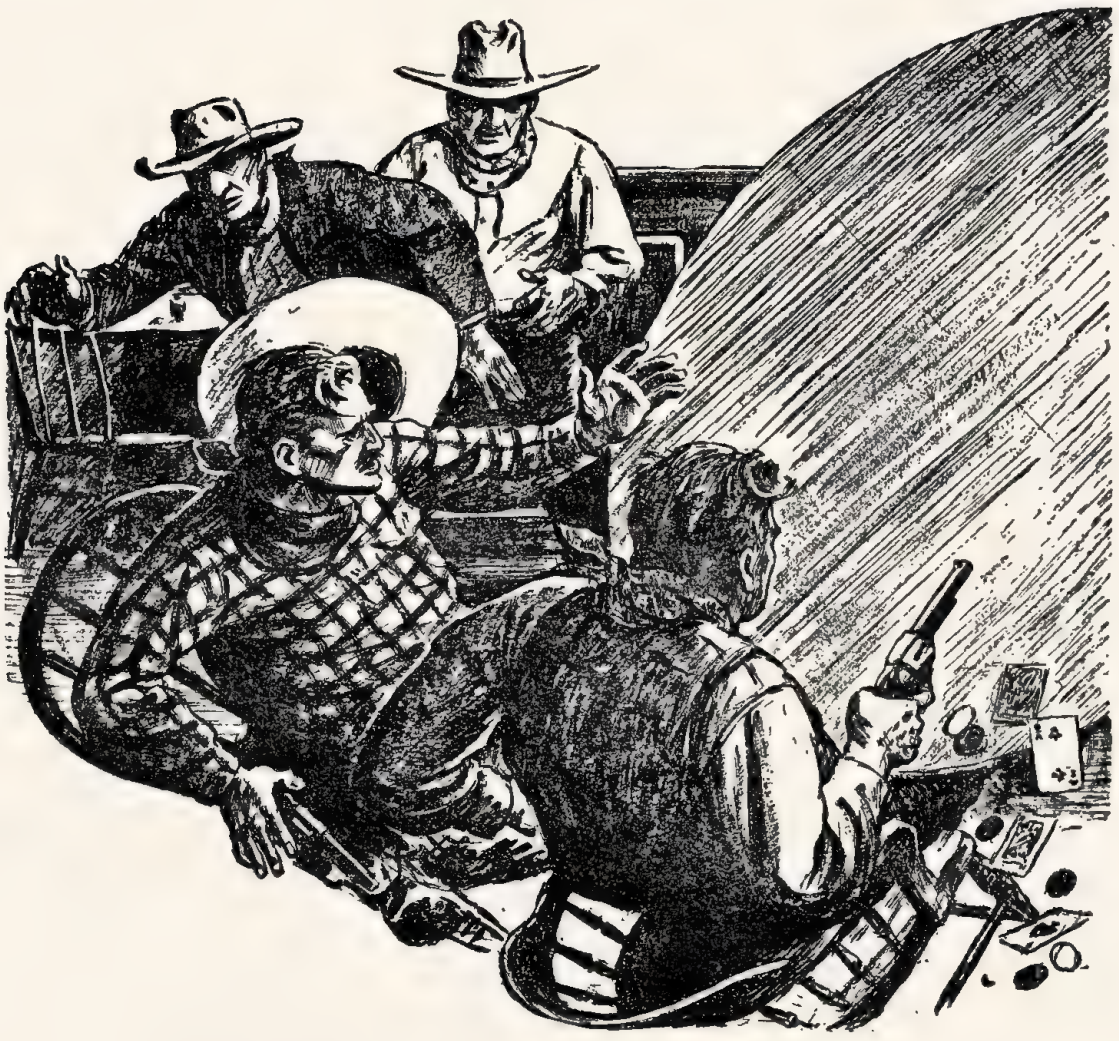
"Don't hurry," Hank said. "You can't hurry anything like that."

"Like what?" Steve demanded, innocently.

"Hell, boss," Hank muttered, "I kin read that stuff just as good as you can."

Donegals Die Fighting!

By M. HOWARD LANE



CHAPTER ONE

A Colt Welcome

THE OVERLAND paused just long enough at Stillwater Junction for Black Dan Donegal to swing down the coach steps, and then it pulled out again. Cinders and smoke engulfed Dan for a minute, but he didn't seem to notice or care. He was happy that he was home again. Soon he would be in Wind River Valley.

Thinking back, he realized that it was almost a month since he and his dad, old Mike Donegal, his brothers, and Chet and Pete, had loaded their fattest steers aboard a stock train for shipment to Chicago.

"It's the youngun's turn to ride herd on 'em this year," old Mike had chuckled, and he had surveyed Black Dan's six foot length.

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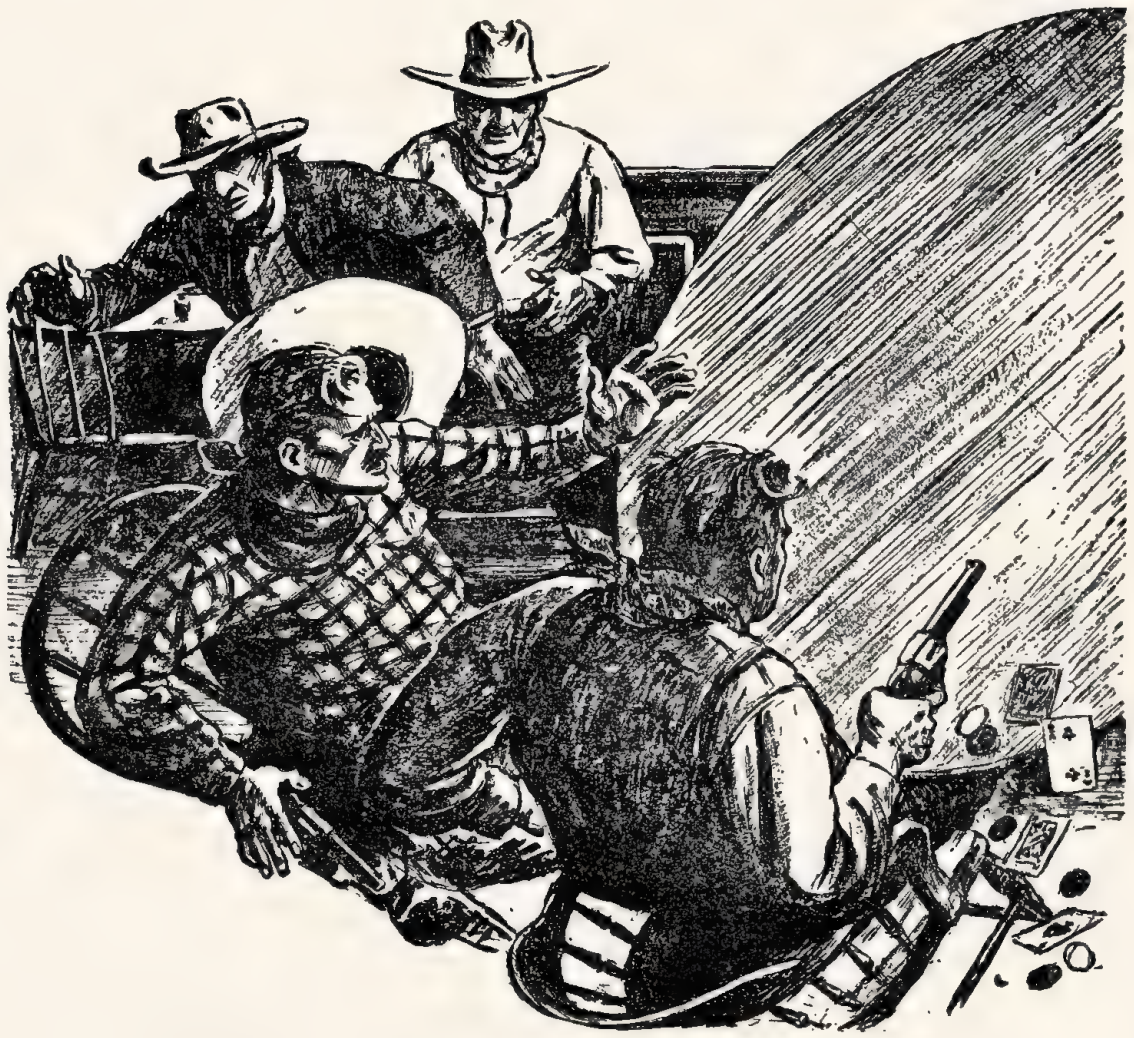

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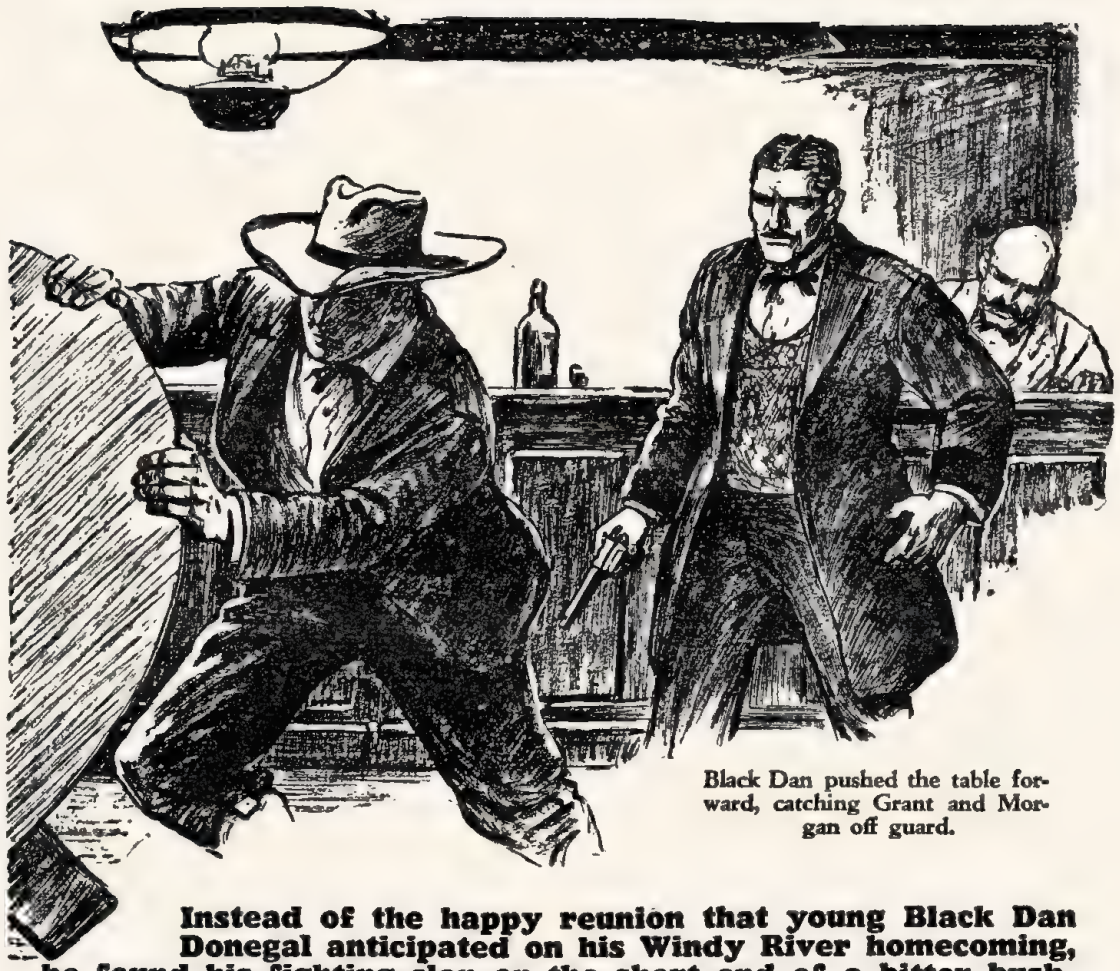


Black Dan pushed the table forward, catching Grant and Morgan off guard.

Instead of the happy reunion that young Black Dan Donegal anticipated on his Windy River homecoming, he found his fighting clan on the short end of a bitter bushwhack war. . . . Which must continue to exact its bloody toll until the last Donegal was buried beneath that strife-torn range!

Dan looked around the little red depot for his folks. But the platform was empty.

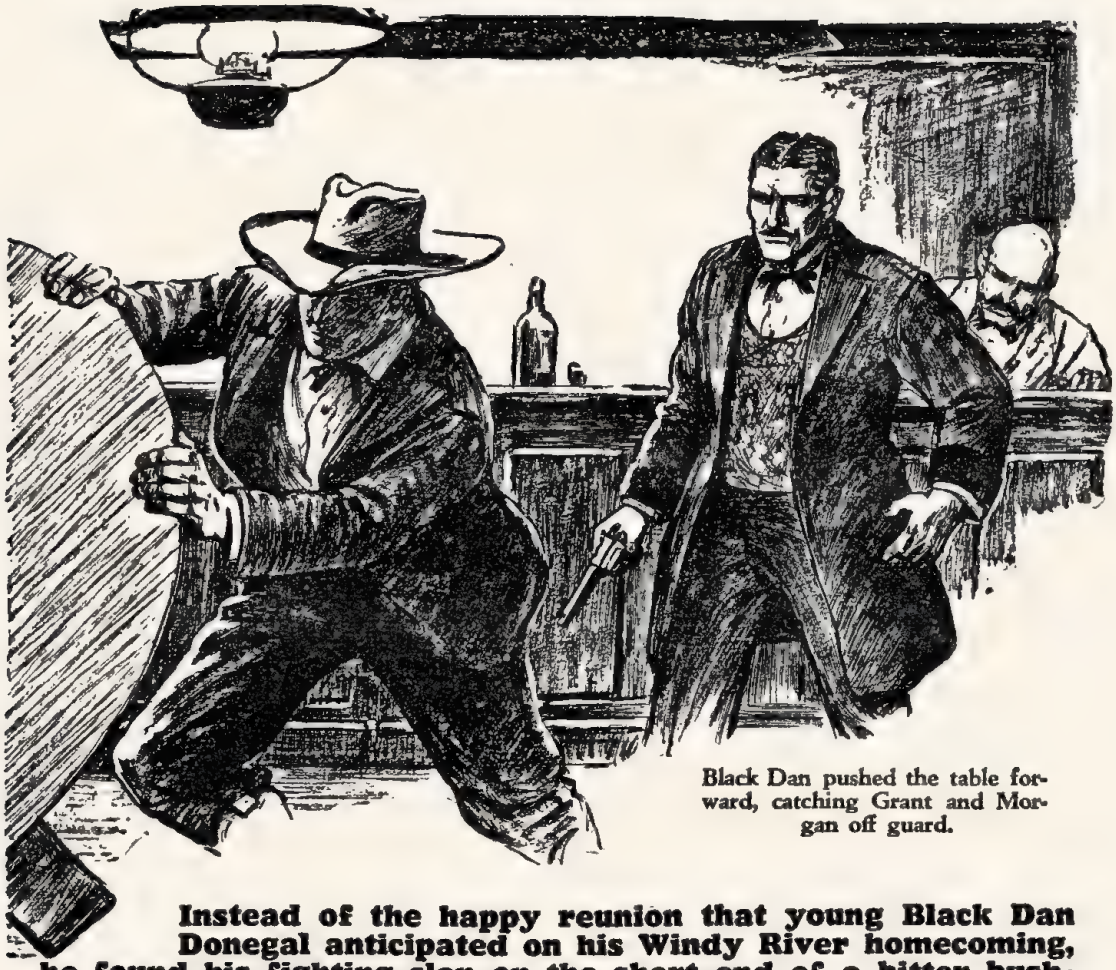
"Mebbe they're inside, chewin' the rag with old Pop Parnell," Dan muttered, and he stooped and picked up his valise. He'd telegraphed the Donegals after buying his ticket home, telling them when he'd arrive. And he'd guessed that the whole clan would ride in to meet him, anxious to hear of his experiences in the Windy City. And even more anxious to finger the long crisp bills that filled the money-belt beneath his white shirt. There was an even five thousand dollars in that belt, enough to finish paying off the mortgage on their Wind River ranch, with money left over for running expenses until next year. Yes, for once the Donegals would be sitting free and easy without having to worry about finances.

Dan started across the cindery station yard, valise gripped in his right hand. A high, chill wind clawed at his legs and whipped his coat. It whooped about the station with a mournful howl. This was a hell of a day to return on.

As he started up the steps, Dan could see the lights of Stillwater a quarter mile away toward the river. They looked friendly and homelike.

"Yep, mighty nice," Dan thought. He pushed the station door open with his left hand and stepped inside. Two men came directly at him.

For a moment Dan figured the men were his brothers, and then he saw the black handkerchief masks that covered their faces. One had a Colt in his hand, and the other was swinging a wagon-spoke. Dan flung his valise toward the man with the Colt.



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Instead of the happy reunion that young Black Dan Donegal anticipated on his Windy River homecoming, he found his fighting clan on the short end of a bitter bushwhack war. . . . Which must continue to exact its bloody toll until the last Donegal was buried beneath that strife-torn range!

Dan looked around the little red depot for his folks. But the platform was empty.

"Mebbe they're inside, chewin' the rag with old Pop Parnell," Dan muttered, and he stooped and picked up his valise. He'd telegraphed the Donegals after buying his ticket home, telling them when he'd arrive. And he'd guessed that the whole clan would ride in to meet him, anxious to hear of his experiences in the Windy City. And even more anxious to finger the long crisp bills that filled the money-belt beneath his white shirt. There was an even five thousand dollars in that belt, enough to finish paying off the mortgage on their Wind River ranch, with money left over for running expenses until next year. Yes, for once the Donegals would be sitting free and easy without having to worry about finances.

Dan started across the cindery station yard, valise gripped in his right hand. A high, chill wind clawed at his legs and whipped his coat. It whooped about the station with a mournful howl. This was a hell of a day to return on.

As he started up the steps, Dan could see the lights of Stillwater a quarter mile away toward the river. They looked friendly and homelike.

"Yep, mighty nice," Dan thought. He pushed the station door open with his left hand and stepped inside. Two men came directly at him.

For a moment Dan figured the men were his brothers, and then he saw the black handkerchief masks that covered their faces. One had a Colt in his hand, and the other was swinging a wagon-spoke. Dan flung his valise toward the man with the Colt.

Then quickly he whirled toward the man on his right. The wagon spoke grazed his head, landed solidly on his left shoulder. Dan swung his right in a short chopping blow. It was a solid blow, he could feel the man's nose turn to pulp. But that was the last blow he struck. A pair of apelike arms circled his knees from behind and the man with the spoke leaned down and struck viciously. Dan fell to the floor like an overloaded sack of meal.

Consciousness came to Dan slowly. At first it was like a dream. He could see his father, old Mike, handing him his first razor and quizzically eyeing the dark fuzz along his youthful jaw. "Sure, and you're another black Irishman," old Mike had grinned. "Ye look enough like Fightin' Duke, your grandsire to be his son 'stead of mine. He lived by one rule, son. 'Act as good as you look, and never pick trouble with no man. But if it comes your way don't sidestep.' "

And a thoughtful youngster had listened, and reminiscently rubbed knuckles already scarred with youthful school-day battles. "Mebbe," he'd told old Mike, "I better make myself ready just in case."

He'd pestered his brothers, Chet and Pete into sparring with him, and he'd taken more than one good-natured beating from them, but he'd learned a great deal from them. Then he'd borrowed their Colts and carbines to practice with, and there probably wasn't a stone along Wind River that he hadn't been peppered with lead. And as time passed young Black Dan had gotten so he could outshoot, outride and outfight both of his brothers. After that Stillwater got to calling them the 'Four Donegals'.

They'd come into this Yellowstone country when Dan was a ten year old button, driving a drought-thinned Texas herd before them. Old Mike had started out by purchasing a little chunk of Wind River Valley land from the local bank. It had been right on the border of the vast Bloody Arrow which dominated the range clean back to the Crazy Mountains. Wind River Grant owned the Bloody Arrow and he and the Donegals became fast friends. As the years wore on he sold them Bloody Arrow range bordering their original acres.

The Donegals had kept themselves strapped, building up their little herd and buying land, but now they had all the range they needed. There'd be no more tough sledding for them, once old Mike laid twenty-five hundred dollars on Wind River Grant's desk.

DAN came fully awake as he remembered the money. He clutched at his waist —it was empty. His white store shirt had been ripped open. It was all blood spattered. His nose was still bleeding, as a drop fell on his empty hand, the full memory of what had happened rushed back. Two masked men had jumped him when he'd stepped inside the depot. They'd laid him low with a wagon-spoke club, but not before he'd managed to get in one blow. The knuckles of his right hand were still sore, and he remembered the pulpy feel of the punch he'd landed.

"Somebody's goin' to have a mighty sore nose around these parts," he muttered, "and if I ever see the dirty son again—"

A strange gurgling sound came from behind the high counter directly across the floor from him.

Dan stumbled to his feet, and the room revolved like a Fourth of July pinwheel. He made the counter with staggering steps, and grabbed it to stay on his feet. There was a little swing door in the barrier a few feet to his right. Dan reached it and pushed through, and he saw what had happened to the old night agent.

Pop Parnell was stretched out like a bulldogged calf, feet and hands bound with heavy twine. A dirty red signal flag had been stuffed between his teeth. Otherwise the oldtimer looked unhurt. His faded eyes were open and snapping blue hell and brimstone.

Dan grinned in spite of himself. "Quit that growlin', Pop," he said sternly. "You'll give way at the seams if you don't!"

He found his clasp knife, and a few silver coins in his pants pocket. They were all that was left of the herd money. And before he stooped to cut the old agent loose, Black Dan Donegal laid the silver carefully on the counter.

It took only a few minutes to free Pop Parnell, but it took another five to let him blow off steam. Dan listened admiringly. He'd never heard such cussing in his life.

"So t'was you they was waitin' for," Pop said when he'd calmed down a bit, "they walked in on me through the baggage room

door, and had me hog-tied and gagged before I knew what was happenin'. After that they just set around not talkin' and I knew they were figurin' to jump somebody comin' in on the Overland. But I never figured t'was you."

Dan interrupted. "What about my folks? They got my wire didn't they?"

Pop Parnell had tottered to his desk, and was filling his pipe from a humidor there. "Telygram?" he ejaculated. "I didn't take down no message, and I doubt if that young whippersnapper I'm breakin' in for the day shift took one either. Ain't no record of it in the files. If he did, he probably handed it over to old Sam Perkins for delivery with your regular mail. You can ask him if you're a mind. He's probably settin' in a stud game up at Harry Chandler's, Yellowstone."

Dan leaned against the counter, and held a handkerchief to his nose. "What's this kid's name? He musta showed up since I pulled out for Chicago."

"Jest a boomer," Parnell grunted. "The office sent him up from Cheyenne when Jim Bennet decided it was time for him to retire. He calls hisself Cam Carson. Mebbe there was a mix-up at the t'other end of the line and your message never got sent."

Dan wiped the worst of the gore from his shirt, and buttoned his gray coat. "My wire got through," he said flatly, "and the gents who were waiting for me got it instead of dad!"

"Yeah," Parnell agreed slowly, "that does make sense. Iffen they didn't know you were comin' in tonight, they wouldn't a been here."

"Right," Dan nodded, and he pushed his black hair back across an aching skull.

"An' they got your herd money," Parnell said. "You were knocked out for most half an hour so there ain't no use tryin' to foller 'em now."

Dan looked at the four coins on the counter. There were two quarters and two half dollars. "That," he said slowly, "is all I've got left," and smouldering anger was beating like a hammer inside his chest. "A dollar and a half to pay off the twenty-five hundred we owe Grant!"

Pop Parnell's old face sobered. "Iffen you hand it to him, you'll have to take a trip to the Pearly Gate. Wind River got hisself killed jest two days after you pulled out for Chi!"

CHAPTER TWO

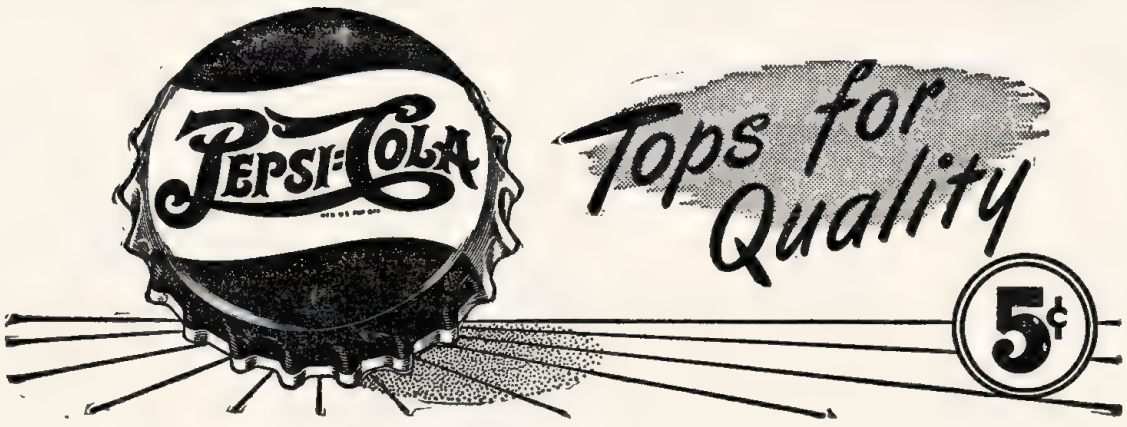
Donegals Walk Alone

BLACK DAN straightened slowly, and surprise made him forget the dull ache at the base of his skull. Wind River Grant and old Mike had gotten to be close cronies, that was when the oldtimer could get away from his despotic son and daughter. Shaddrock Grant and his sister, Catherine, had always tried to keep Wind River from associating with 'those shanty Irish' as they called the Donegals. And now the old cattle king was dead.

"How—" he began.

"Got throwed while he was out ridin'," Parnell said. "You really missed somethin' in not bein' here for his funeral. They had him laid out in state at Barker's Funeral Parlor, and the procession follerin' the hearse was night a half mile long. Oldtimers come clean from Idaho and Wyomin' to pay their last respects."

There wasn't a horse on the Bloody Ar-



row capable of throwing Wind River Grant. Dan was about to say that, instead he murmured, "So now we've got Shad to deal with. The Donegals are in for trouble."

Pop Parnell's kind old face screwed up swiftly. He almost whispered now. "So much has been happenin' so danged fast you natcherly don't know about that either."

Dan braced himself against the counter, and stared directly at the agent.

"Keep talkin', Pop," he said softly.

The old man gulped. "I hate to tell you this Dan but your brother Chet is dead, and Pete's got a busted laig. Your dad is tendin' him!"

Dan's face turned white but that was the only emotion he showed. "You're better'n a newspaper, Pop. Keep talkin'!"

Parnell sucked explosively at his pipe. "Chet got a rifle bullet through the brisket somewhere out on yore range two weeks ago. And Pete got one through the laig four days ago."

Black Dan pushed himself from the counter. "And tonight I get my skull cracked. It looks like somebody has declared war on the Donegals!"

Pop Parnell studied the solid shape of Black Dan then slowly his gray head shook. "Son," he spoke almost in a whisper, "it looks like the only way for you folks to save yourselves is to sell out and pull stakes. I dunno what you're up against, neither does your dad, and Sheriff Houston is up in the air higher'n a kite. So's the whole range for that matter. A man ain't got much chance against cut bank lead. Why don't you pull out afore you're all dead?"

Dan laughed without mirth. "Donegals don't run," he said simply. As he stepped through the counter gate to get his grip Dan turned, "Pop, let's you and me both forget what happened here tonight. Don't let on you were hogtied, or that I was robbed."

"You mean you ain't goin' to see the sheriff?" Parnell's voice was an outraged squall.

"Has he located Chet's killer?"

"Nary a trace."

"Then how do you expect him to locate the two gents who buffaloed us?"

"Wa'al, I—"

"You don't," Black Dan said, and his smile was dry. "So far there's only the four of us, and mebbe a fifth man that sent 'em, who know I've lost that dinero. They're going to be right curious when we don't make a fuss about it. And sometimes when gents git to guessin' they make a mite of a slip. It ain't much of a card to hold in our hands, but it's better than none. Right now I'm goin' to head for home just as fast as one of Tom Donnely's horses will take me."

Parnell looked at Black Dan's empty thigh. "You ain't packin' a gun?"

Dan shrugged. "I didn't need mine in Chicago. Maybe I can borrow one up town from Harry Chandler and get a look at your boomer at the same time. Meanwhile keep your eyes open Pop and your mouth shut!"

He stepped outside, and the chill wind beat through his clothes, but Dan was hardly conscious of it. Several hours ago he had been carefree and full of song. He was returning to the rest of the Donegals. But that was all changed—the Donegals were only three now. Smiling Chet dead—somehow he couldn't believe it. His thoughts were broken as he came to Donnely's Livery. He entered through the half open door.

Evidently Donnely's night hostler, Jerry Sims, hadn't expected any customer at this hour, for he was snoring on the rumpled bunk in one corner of the small office.

At the sound of his boots in the office doorway, Sims awoke and blinked in the light of the hanging lamp overhead.

"Bad night to be out," he mumbled, and then he seemed to recognize his visitor for the first time. "Donegal," he growled, "you ain't got no bronc stabled here."

Dan's brows arched. "You sure don't sound very hospitable, Jerry," he commented. "Since when does a pilgrim have to keep his own horse in your stable?"

Sims blinked and looked a little shamefaced. "Most of 'em don't," he muttered, "but Tom told me you Donegals do, less'n yuh want to put up a cash deposit for the worth of the hoss ye rent. Yuh see," he stammered, "folks don't seem to know what's goin' to happen next—"

BLACK DAN controlled himself. "Saddle me your best hoss," he said flatly, "I'll bring you the dinero."

Without a backward glance, he swung once more to the boardwalk leading on up

the tree-shaded street toward Harry Chandler's Yellowstone.

He turned through the slat doors of the Yellowstone, and saw Harry Chandler standing near the long bar. He was a small, dapper man in impeccable black and white. One of the richest men in the community. He treated every man with the same icy respect. His games were square, his liquor was good, and so was his reputation. He granted favors when it was within his power, and expected the same in return.

The wind whooped in after Dan, and he saw all eyes turn toward him. The big low-ceiled room was fairly well filled with townsmen. There were also a sprinkling of ranchers, caught in town by darkness who were evidently planning on staying the night. Dan glimpsed more than one familiar face, and then his eyes passed over four poker players seated at a round table against the far wall.

Men he had no wish to see tonight. One of them was Shaddrock Grant. Broad-shouldered, and already showing the fat of easy living. He was probably no more than three years older than Black Dan but his lined countenance made him look forty.

To his left sat Tate Morgan, Bloody Arrow foreman. He was a lank and taciturn man. There were few in all this Yellowstone country who could actually say they knew him, and none who could call him friend. His well-oiled guns were always at his hips. Common gossip was that Tate had a back-trail of terror and bloodshed, but none could prove it.

Facing Shad was a wedge-faced kid wearing the latest in foppish town attire. Dan's eyes steadied on the youth a moment, and he guessed the young fellow was the Cam Carson old Pop Parnell had told him about. Dan would have liked to question the youngster about the missing telegram but his first chore was to get out to Wind River ranch and see old Mike and Pete. Perhaps between the three of them they could figure out why the Four Donegals had been slated for death.

Dan was conscious of eyes turning away from him. A few ranchers and townsmen nodded a curt hello. Others were doing their best to avoid even that gesture of courtesy. Their reaction brought a bitter knowledge to Black Dan. Whatever was coming, the Donegals could count on facing it alone. No one was going to take their side for fear of being involved in the same fight for survival that was facing them.

His heels hit the floor like the staccato beat of a drummer's sticks, and he kept all expression from his face as he tramped the length of the bar.

Harry Chandler looked at him out of opaque, slate-hued eyes, as he halted in front of the Yellowstone owner. "Can you spare a minute?" Dan asked.

Chandler nodded, and his glance flicked over the bloodstains on Dan's shirt, then quietly he turned, and moved to a closed door at the end of the bar. Dan followed him, and he could feel the impact of every eye in the room on his back.

Still not speaking, Chandler brought glasses and a bottle from a drawer of his wide black desk. Dan watched him pour two drinks, and he was wondering if the saloonman was going to desert the Donegals along with all the rest.

"From the looks of things you need this," Chandler said easily.

Dan matched the saloonman's mood. "Mebbe you will, too, Harry," he said coolly. "I want a hundred dollars, and the loan of a belt gun."

The hint of a smile touched Chandler's lips. "So that's where the blood came from," he said in his flat, toneless voice. "You Donegals seem to be riding the rough string these days, and before we go any farther let me say I was right sorry about Chet. They didn't come any better in my book!"

The whisky was driving some of the chill from his blood. Dan put his glass on the desk for a refill. "Harry," he said bluntly, "you hear things and you see things."

A mask seemed to settle over the saloonman's face. "I play my cards face up across the board, Donegal," he said flatly. "No questions asked—none answered! The easy times are gone from this range. I'd advise you to pull stakes while you've still got the chance."

Dan laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. "Parnell suggested the same thing, and I'll give you the same answer I gave him. Donegals don't run!"

He stood up from the chair where he had been seated and the ache in the back

of his head was worse than the jumping of a sore tooth. "Thanks, for the drink," he said flatly. "It's more'n anybody else seems ready to give a Donegal around this town."

Chandler put his long slender hands on the desk, and regarded them soberly for a minute. "Dan," he said at last, "don't judge your neighbors in too big a hurry. They're little fellers like you, and they don't know whether the trouble that's hit your Wind River ranch is just your personal fight, or whether it's the start of a range war that might involve them all. *Find why Chet was killed and Pete wounded.* Then you'll have plenty of friends again!"

With his hand on the door knob, Dan drew a deep breath. He could see the logic of the saloonman's talk, and it made him feel a little better. "I aim to do just that," he said flatly. "Adios, Harry."

He was three paces down the length of the bar when he heard:

"Donegal, I want to see you!"

CHAPTER THREE

Death At Camoosa Cut-Off

THE voice belonged to Shaddrock Grant still seated at the card table. Dan didn't have to turn to recognize the surly, arrogant tone. That voice hadn't changed much since Shad Grant had been the school bully. "My dad bosses the range," young Grant had boasted, "and I'm gonna boss you kids, savvy?"

There hadn't been a boy in the school who'd liked Shaddrock Grant, and Dan doubted if there was a man in Stillwater or Wind River Valley he could call friend. Rancher and townsman alike were probably wondering how a cattle king's mantle would rest on Shad Grant's shoulders.

Dan turned toward the table. Silence had settled once again over the saloon, and Dan could feel veiled glances following him as he stepped toward the group.

Shad Grant's mouth was wide and full-lipped. He was smiling as Black Dan drew near the table. Tate Morgan on his right was impassive as an Indian, but his dull, black eyes missed nothing. The impression came to Dan that this group had been waiting here for him all evening. If they had, the implications were plain, but he forced them to the back of his mind. He was going to need a clear head right now, and maybe a pair of ready fists.

Shad leaned back in his chair, and hooked his thumbs through the armholes of his expensive calfskin vest. "Donegal," his voice boomed through the big room, "I'm right glad to see yuh home. Fact is, you've come in about the right time," he gestured at poker chips and cards scattered about the table. "You see the boys have just about cleaned me, and seein' as you owe the Bloody twenty-five hundred, I'll collect right now!"

Dan had guessed that this would be coming, and he had his answer ready. "We owe the Bloody Arrow that dinero, Grant," he said coolly, "not you!"

Shad Grant's right hand dropped below table level, and the house man who had been sitting with them—climbed quietly from his chair and sidled away.

"*I'm* the Bloody Arrow now, Donegal," he drawled, "and I want that dinero!"

Shad Grant was playing his game for the benefit of the crowd. He realized Dan didn't have the money but wanted him to admit it. Dan was aware of this as he said, "Your dinero is right here." He patted his flat middle. "And when I hand it over, I want your sister to sign the receipt along with you. I trusted your dad, but not you!"

"I won't take that kind of talk from any man," Shad thundered, and Black Dan knew that they'd been trying to work him into a corner where they'd have some excuse to gun him down.

Dan took one huge step which carried him to the rim of the table. Grant's hand was rising. So was Tate Morgan's. Dan pushed the table, upending it. The farther rim caught Grant and Morgan, knocking their chairs off balance. Dan heard them fall, and he leaped back and to one side, as a wild bullet chunked into the ceiling. Men were ducking toward the exists and yelling, but one had come quietly to stand alone in the middle of the floor.

"Grant," Harry Chandler's voice was low and sharp, and there was a long .44 Colt balanced easily in his right hand, "I wouldn't shoot again if I were you. Not at an unarmed man. Now take Morgan and the kid with you, and get the hell out of here—don't come back!"

Black Dan watched Morgan and Grant

scramble up from chairs that had splintered beneath their weight. Morgan's face was still without expression. He was the dangerous one, Dan thought.

Shad was red to the roots of his blond hair, and his pale eyes were ablaze as he looked at the saloonman. "You'll regret this, Chandler," he shouted.

"I never regret what I do," Harry Chandler said quietly.

Dan paid attention to Cam Carson for the first time. The kid's red necktie was up under one ear, and he was whiter than the rest. Things were clearing up a bit for Dan. The kid must have turned the telegram over to Shad. But why would Shad want the money? He had enough of it already.

"Come on, Tate," Grant said. "This ain't the only bar in Stillwater." He and his foreman started for the door, and the Carson kid tagged after them. Eyes watched them leave, but nobody had anything to say.

When they were gone, Harry Chandler's glance swung to cover Black Dan. "You're next, Donegal," he said in the same even tones. "I play no favorites!"

Dan moved toward the batwings without a word, and he was remembering the saloonman's advice given in his office. "Go out and find *why* Chet was killed and Pete wounded, and you'll have plenty of friends again."

Now, for the first time, he gathered the full import of that statement. If he could prove that Bloody Arrow lead had killed Chet and wounded Pete other small ranchers in their sector of Wind River Valley would line up on his side. And if he proved that Bloody Arrow wanted their Wind River ranch, they'd join the Donegals even faster, figuring one ranch might lead to another, maybe theirs.

Another thought struck him with the impact of a fist as he moved toward the Livery stable. Wind River Grant had never bothered a small neighbor unless he could prove that neighbor was eating Bloody Arrow beef. He'd even made a crony of Mike Donegal. Two old warhorses, they'd got along fine together. "Wind River," Black Dan thought, "wouldn't do a damned thing to hurt us. Shad knows that well as me. So if *he* wanted our spread he'd have to see that Wind River was out of the way first!"

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There was just one conclusion a man could draw. "Wind River didn't die accidentally," Dan whispered the words. "He was killed—*murdered by his own son!*"

DAN saw no sign of Grant on his walk to Donnely's stable, but two other saloons in Stillwater were open and the three might have gone into one of them. Black Dan turned into Tom Donnely's and his eyes found the shape of a saddled horse tied to a post midway down the wide center aisle.

Jerry Sims was awake. He came shuffling from the little office, peering through the gloom. "You bring some money along?" he asked sourly.

Dan looked at the old hostler, and fought to keep his temper. "Jerry," he said, "I'm takin' that hoss. You'll get it back tomorrow. Tell Tom I stole it if you feel that way. And while I'm doin' things up brown I'll steal a gun if you got one about the place!"

Jerry Sims waggled his hands nervously. "There ain't a gun on the premises, Dan. An' Donnely is goin' to be powerful mad if you take that hoss. Why don't you stay over tonight? Yuh can have my bunk. I'm too old to give a damn about what folks think of me. 'Sides it's a wild night, and that Camoosa Trail out along the badlands to your place is where your brothers ate lead."

Stray rays of lamplight drifted through the office door. They struck Dan Donegal's black eyes and made them pinpoint bright. He looked straight at the old hostler, and asked a sudden question.

"Just where was Wind River Grant throwed?"

In the dim light he watched Jerry Sims mouth open and shut in sheer surprise. "Why, why damn, he got his neck broke along the same trail! Funny I never thought of that before."

"There's a lot of things folks ain't thought much about around here," Dan said, and he tramped down the runway, and swung aboard the long-legged dun Sim had saddled. "Jerry," he said, as he rode back alongside the hostler, "suppose you just forget what we've been talking about?"

Sims' eyes rolled. "Dan," he said, "I'm too old to get myself kilt. But you ain't! Ride light, boy. Ride light!"

Dan left town at a gallop. The horse beneath him was fresh and ready to run. He gave the animal its head along the wagon road that paralleled the loops of the Yellowstone. On either side of the river, for the space of half a dozen miles, stretched prairie and then the Indian Hills covered with sparse cedar and pines lifted from the plain. The range ran south into Wyoming, and the Crow Reservation near the border. On this northern bank of the Yellowstone, the hills formed the western boundary of Wind River Valley.

At the summit of the wagon road crossing the Indian Hills, Black Dan paused to give his mount a rest, and the brittle white moon scudding in and out of passing clouds shed a bright, almost incandescent radiance over this whole vast country.

Below him, Dan could see the streak of Wind River, winding away toward the Crazy Mountains that blocked out the northern horizon. Off that way, another five miles, lay the Bloody Arrow. Badlands, spreading on either side of Wind River, covered most of the territory between here and the big ranch, save for the few thousand acres that comprised their own ranch. Some of the last strip they'd bought from Wind River Grant had cut into the badlands, and was mostly worthless, but old Mike had taken it, for there were patches of rich graze in the folds and innumerable draws between the sharp tangle of cedar brake ridges and pine-crested hills.

In the moonlight, the whole country was just like a relief map. Dan studied it with a shaking head. The answer to death lay down there below him along Camoosa Trail that cut northward from the road at the base of these hills he was crossing. Two men had died along that trail, and one had been wounded.

"It's got me stumped," Dan muttered, and he sent his mount forward again.

He was still searching for an answer to murder when the dun swung almost of its own accord into the Camoosa Trail turnoff. Dan heard the whine of wind through scrub cedar and brush on either side of the trail, and his ear caught a louder rattle like the sound of a horse being forced through dry thickets.

He flung himself forward along the neck of his mount, and his heels were digging

into the dun's flanks just as muzzle flame bloomed on his right. Dan heard the rush of the slug through space his body had just occupied, then a voice crying: "I got him. Nailed him clean. He went over the nub of his kak like a hinge closing—"

He'd bent forward, Black Dan realized, just as the drygulcher had triggered, and the tricky moonlight had made it look like he was hit. The dun was racing on along the trail. In seconds he'd be out of sight of the men who'd been waiting for him and able to straighten up again.

"So they think they got me," Dan muttered against the dun's mane. "Now ain't that nice. Mebbe we can add it to the flush we're drawin'—"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ghost of Black Dan Donegal

IT WAS close to midnight, but there was still the glow of light in one wing of the rambling log ranchhouse old Mike Donegal and his sons had built. Beyond were outbuildings and corrals. The house was set on a shelf above Wind River and a man could just about drop a line from the kitchen window down to the stream and hook a mess of trout for supper. This was home, and coming back to it was something that had occupied Dan's mind most of the while he'd been in Chicago. Homesickness, he'd called it, and hadn't been ashamed to admit his emotion.

He'd counted on coming home and bringing money to clear their debts. Counted on having a celebration with old Mike, Chet and Pete.

"So I come back to damnation!" Dan muttered, and a hail from the dark porch caught him as he curved in across the wide dooryard. "Who's there? Sing out, mister, or eat lead!"

"I've been dodging it most of the night," Dan called dryly.

"Son!" Old Mike Donegal came rushing down the steps to pump Dan's hand as he swung from the dun. "Lordy, I'm glad to see you. But why in tarnation didn't you let us know yuh were comin'?"

Dan looked at his father, and the change a month had wrought in old Mike was startling. Straight as an Indian lance at sixty, and as tough, old Mike's hair had been streaked with gray when he'd left. Now it was white as Crazy Mountain snow, and lines curving from the corners of his hawk-beak nose to his lips had deepened two-fold. But his Irish black eyes still carried their indomitable fire.

"Son—" he started to say, but Dan halted him with a shake of his head.

"Dad," he said simply, "I know all about Chet. Let's get inside and hold our powwow where Pete can listen in. We got a heap to talk over, and no time to waste."

The big house was just the same as Dan remembered it, and yet a feeling of emptiness struck him as he followed his father down a hall to Pete's bedroom. Chet's big happy voice was gone. His tramping boots and ready laughter wouldn't echo along this hall again. Shad Grant was going to pay—pay plenty!"

The sight of Pete lying gray-faced with pain, and an anger he couldn't quell was another shock to Dan. His brother was twenty-eight and looked forty. At sight of Dan his taut, rebellious expression softened a little.

"Blackie," he'd called Dan that for a long time, "I've been tellin' dad you'd show up one of these days, and then the fur would start flyin'—"

DAN'S eyes moved to Pete's gunbelt and holstered Colt slung over the headboard of his bed. He shucked his coat and bloody shirt, and headed for a closet to gather range garb, talking as he changed clothes.

"I wired you from Chicago," he said in swift staccato phrases, "and the way things shape up a young cuss named Cam Carson turned the message over to Shad Grant."

"Grant—?" Old Mike said explosively.

"Let me finish my talk," Dan cut his father short, "and then we'll see how it jibes with what you know. Two gents tied up Pop Parnell and were waiting for me when I walked into his office. They got the five thousand I was bringin' home. After I woke up, Parnell gave me the news. Warn't pleasant.

"Since then things have been happenin' fast, and they're goin' to keep goin' the same way. Grant and Morgan and this Carson were in the Yellowstone, just like they'd been waiting for me to show up there, and I figure Grant tipped his hand by makin' a play for a pay-off when he

knew damned well I didn't have the dinero. They worked me into a corner, aimin' to settle my hash right there, but Harry Chandler sided me, and threw them out—and me right on their heels."

"We ain't got a friend left," Old Mike growled.

"We don't need any!" Dan said savagely.

"Hell started to pop soon as Wind River broke his neck," Pete put in.

"Wind River Grant was murdered!" Dan said deliberately, and he was latching Pete's gunbelt about his waist as he spoke. He heard his dad and brother curse with surprise, but he went on before either of them could speak.

"Murdered, and I aim to prove it. Here's what makes me think so. He was killed riding Camoosa Trail. So was Chet. You were nailed along the same strip, Pete, and at least a pair of gents were waiting to gulch me when I hit the turn-off awhile ago. I heard one of their broncs and ducked just as the cuss fired. He yelled to his pard that they'd got me. I figger it was the same pair who stuck me up in the depot. But that don't matter much." He paused a moment before continuing.

"What counts is this," he emphasized his words with a straight look at Mike and Pete. "All attacks have hit along the Camoosa cut-off through the badlands. There ain't many who travel that trail save Bloody Arrow hands and us. Part of it runs through that last strip we bought from Wind River. And if I ain't missin' my guess that is the hunk of land Shad Grant wants back. Wind River was killed along that trail because he saw somethin' he warn't supposed to see, and because Shad wanted control of the Bloody Arrow so's he could take after us. Chet was killed for the same reason. And they tried to get you, Pete. I want to know just where yuh were when lead tagged you, because I'm headin' for said point soon as I can saddle a fresh bronc!"

Pete wet his lips. "Lord," he said, "she fits like four cards comin' to a straight flush, but yuh still got to pick up the fifth. I was nailed out looking for strays over near our boundary. Wind River's hoss pitched him in just about the same neighborhood. Yuh think—"

"I think," Dan told them deliberately, "that Shad Grant and Tate Morgan want the badlands to themselves, and I aim to find out why."

"Yuh ain't ridin' alone," old Mike started to yelp.

"I'm riding alone!" Dan said. He made a flat chopping gesture with his hand. "And I'm pullin' out pronto. Mike," his lips twisted in the crooked Irish smile that his father remembered. "If we don't move fast you'll find Grant and Morgan and the two gents who stuck me up ridin' in here to wipe you out. They figure they nailed me tonight, so they won't be lookin' for me to show up ag'in. They were probably afraid to polish me off in the depot for fear of pulling in railroad dicks, so they tried to push me into a corner in the Yellowstone. That failin', Grant knew he'd have his men ready to make a second try for me at the Camoosa cut-off. And now they figger they got me, so they won't be expectin' to see the Ghost of Black Dan Donegal takin' a badlands ride!"

"And where you figger said ride will end?" old Mike asked softly.

Black Dan looked at his father, and his eyes were bleak. "Wherever I meet Shad Grant and Tate Morgan!"

IN THE barn he saddled his favorite mount, a black named Satan, and he made sure that the Winchester beneath his stirrup was full loaded. Riding out, he took one last look at the only home he could remember, and at old Mike standing on the porch. With a short wave of his hand he made reply to his father's farewell. Black Dan was aware that it might be for the last time. There was mystery in the badlands, and waiting death. He might soon lose another son.

The moon was a bright silver disk in the sky when he hit the Camoosa cut-off and turned north along the trail toward the Bloody Arrow. It was a winding, two mile ride to the boundary. The trail twisted through cedar brake washes, and dodged pine-stippled ridges. Dan held the black to a trot. The sound of galloping hooves in the vast silence of the night would carry a long way, and there might be listening ears here in the brakes.

A half mile from the boundary, Dan drew his saddle-gun, and balanced it lightly across his knees. The trail tipped up ahead to cross a hump-backed ridge that

ran back to the taller bulk of the Indian Hills. In times long gone, there'd been a trail along their crest that ran from the Crazy Mountains down into Wyoming. Migrating red men had followed it southward trailing the once great herds of buffalo in their annual trek to the southern plains.

Thought of that old trail halted Black Dan at the crest of the hump-back ridge and he realized suddenly that he was picking up the fifth card to fill his royal flush. And like an echo to his thoughts the wind sweeping toward him from the north brought the faint bawl of cattle.

He was close enough now to the Bloody Arrow line for the sound to come from a bunch of their stock, and yet it seemed to Dan that the lowing of the cattle was coming from the tangle of washes and draws off to the right near Wind River.

"Mebbe," he murmured half aloud, "I've found what we're lookin' for!"

Satan moved right to the touch of his spurs, following the line of the hump-back ridge. Riding slowly, he edged through pine and clumps of scrub cedar. The moon slid from behind obscuring clouds, and every now and then Dan could catch a glimpse of the badlands spreading out in a tangle below the higher ridge he was following. Sound came welling up to him in increasing volume, and then as the moon scudded clear again, he caught the sight of flashing horns in a coulee to the left of the ridge.

Dan halted, and he spoke his thoughts aloud. "So this is it! Shad and Morgan have been pushing rustled steers off Wyoming range up along that travois trail to here. Holding them in the brakes till they can blotch the brands, then mixin' it with Bloody Arrow stock. No wonder they want our Wind River lay-out. With it under their thumbs they'd be able to double operations and nobody the wiser." They had a sweet setup.

Dan was too busy with his discovery to notice a faint rustling of the nearby foliage. A harsh voice called out, "Drop that 'chester, fella, and swing your bronc around slow and easy!"

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CHAPTER FIVE

Remember Fightin' Duke!

BLACK DAN let the rifle drop with a clatter, and he realized the forward cant of his body had hidden the herd guard's view of Pete's Colt on his hip. He was ducking and wheeling Satan toward the sound of that voice as he heard the rifle strike flinty soil.

A man with a patch of something white across the bridge of his nose was crouched in the gloom beneath the pines. The carbine in his hands was swinging up, when something seemed to halt the weapon.

"Donegal," he gasped raspingly. "Black Dan. You're—"

"Not a ghost yet!" Dan said, and Pete's Colt spoke for all Four Donegals. He saw his lead spin the herd-guard, and the man dropped his rifle with a hoarse cry.

Like a springing cougar, Dan left his saddle. The wiry weight of his body smashed the other down. He heard breath whoosh from the man's chest, and his scream of pain: "Git off me, I'm bleedin' to death!"

Dan crawled to his feet, and kicked the man's rifle farther into the shadows. He retrieved his own fallen saddle gun, and said grimly: "Git up. You ain't goin' to die for a little while yet." There was something familiar about the shape of the man's body, and as he watched him struggle upright and turn Dan recognized his attacker as a Bloody Arrow hand he'd seen a few times in Stillwater. Lucky Latham, he'd heard the man called, and the name brought a twisted grin to his lips as he looked at the crude bandage taped over the man's nose.

"Looks," he drawled, "like your luck done run out on you twice tonight, Lucky. How'd my fist feel back there in the depot?"

"You can go straight to hell!" Latham said sullenly.

"That's where we're both goin', Dan replied, and you're going to lead me there. Yuh got a bronc around somewhere close, and we're taking a ride with the business end of my lass rope looped around your neck. T'other end will be dallied to my saddle so if yuh feel like makin' a run, and finishin' yourself off quick why that'll be up to you. Now take me to your boss!"

Latham clutched his bullet-riddled shoulder and groaned. "Morgan'll murder me!"

Dan nodded. "So it's Morgan, eh? I didn't think Shad had the guts or the brains to work out this game single-handed." His voice took on a sudden rasp. "Where are they, Latham? At the Bloody Arrow or Stillwater? Your pard went on to hand 'em my dinero and give 'em the good news that your bushwhack try for me had panned out right. That sign's easy to read. So either he headed for the ranch or doubled back to town after sendin' you up here to keep that nose out of sight. Mister, you better talk or I'm going to put a bullet through your other shoulder."

EARLY risers were just starting to move about Stillwater when a procession rode into town that was enough to make the most wide-awake blink and wonder if he was dreaming. First there was a hunch-bodied horseman swaying in his saddle, and about his neck was the taut loop of a lariat. The rope was dallied to the horn of the second rider's saddle, and the man riding easily aboard the kak was Black Dan Donegal.

Old Pop Parnell, coming off shift, was one of the first to see them. "Dan," he howled, "glory be! Skinny Annis rode in from the Bloody Arrow 'round midnight, and he spread the word that he'd found your carcass out at the Camoosa Trail turnoff. Claimed you'd been dry-gulched, and that he'd toted your body home to your dad. An' now—"

"An' now," Dan grinned tiredly, "you ain't seeing my ghost. I got a leetle present here for Sheriff Houston, and a chore for you," he added as a sudden idea struck him. "Turn back to the Town House and git word up to Shad Grant and Tate Morgan that I'm here. Among other things, Lucky tells me that's where they were plannin' to spend the night."

"Glory be!" the old agent's white mustache was starting to bristle, "I'll shore do 'er. Might even find 'em up and about. The sheriff was aimin' on taking a posse out to look over whar you got gulched soon as daylight come along. Them was two of the fust to volunteer to ride along with him. Harry Chandler was the third, I hear."

Dan grinned. "Pop," he drawled, "you're still better'n a newspaper. Git along to the Town House, and I'll head for the jail."

"You gotta get me to a doctor fust."

"We'll let Houston worry about that," Dan grunted. "Get that hoss movin'!"

The squat log jail lay a half block ahead, and a half block beyond that was the two-story bulk of the hotel. Dan watched Pop Parnell turn and start running awkwardly toward it. Coldly calm, he loosened Pete's Colt in its holster. Sheriff Houston was going to have visitors, shortly!

The door to the sheriff's jail office cracked open as he rode up in front, and the old lawman reached to rub his eyes as he stepped to the porch. Tall, and gangly, and honest, he'd been Stillwater's choice for the last three terms.

"Donegal," he croaked. "Hell's bells, I was just goin' out back to saddle my hoss, and round up the bunch who were goin' to ride with me to your place."

Dan chuckled as he climbed from leather, and the sound was not pleasant. He jerked the rope about Latham's neck. "Step down, Lucky," he advised, "or I'll haul you outa that saddle. Sheriff," his voice crackled, "this gent is one who'll have quite a story to tell yuh. Let's get him inside, where he can do some talkin' before we have visitors. Yeah, Shad and Tate are goin' to be along right soon," he added as Latham shambled up to the jail porch, "and we'll likely need scatter-guns to keep 'em from pluggin' this gent, once they lay eyes on him."

"But why—" the sheriff had stepped aside from the door, and his puzzled face showed that things were happening too fast for him.

Black Dan's laugh was ugly. "Because he can tell a judge enough to send 'em both to Deer Lodge for life! He—"

Head down dejectedly, Latham shuffled through the jail door, and a blast of shotgun fire just about blew him out again. Like a sack with the grain running from it, Lucky Latham sagged forward.

Shock and surprise held Black Dan motionless for the split part of a second, and then he was throwing himself forward in a long, low dive across Latham's riddled body, and Pete Donegal's Colt was in his hand. There was a back door to the office, and Dan guessed that Morgan and Grant had been wise enough to keep a night-long vigil from some point where they could see the road leading into town.

His gun was poised as he struck flat and braced himself on one elbow, but he did not fire, for Shad Grant and Tate Morgan were standing stiff as pokers, hands shoulder high. Surprise sagged their mouths, and with it the first glimmer of fear.

As he reared to his feet, Black Dan saw the reason. Lanky old Mike Donegal towered behind the stocky shape of Grant, and Harry Chandler, his face still calm as rock, stood behind Morgan.

The saloonman was the first to break the silence. "It looks," he said in his precise cool voice, "like most everybody lost some sleep last night!"

"Dad—" Dan said.

Mike Donegal was grinning, and he reminded his son of a satisfied old lobo. "Why nothin'," he drawled, "me'n Pete just got to recollectin' what Fightin' Duke uster say. He allus claimed if trouble come your way not to sidestep. So me'n Pete figgered that I deserved a whack of action myself. Yuh didn't know it, but I was follerin' you most of the way to town. Kinda cut out around yuh though when I figured this was where you were headin'.

"And dang me, when I rid in the back way I found Harry doin' a little snoopin' on his own hook. He was right interested in this hyar pair who were holed up in a shed where they could watch the road and jail at the same time. When they come slippin' in here we were right behind 'em, but not quite quick enough to keep 'em from gut-shootin' Latham."

Sheriff Houston's chuckle was dry. "Latham won't have to talk to send 'em to Deer Lodge. His dyin' bought 'em a hang-noose instead!"

THE END

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Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

Too Hot for Hide-Hunters!

By CHARLES IRWIN

Hank Wilkes and Georgie Wallace, buffalo hunters extraordinary, knew that no amount of pleading could keep them from the Happy Hunting Ground. . . . Then, why should they offer a fifteen hundred dollar bonus to that blood-mad crew o prairie pirates?

From the tree I watched Slam-Bang runnin' like mad.

I WOULD like to tell about Blinker Blinder an' his side-kicks hijackin' three hundred defunct buffalo off me an' Georgie Wallace. Georgie, my partner, was over beyond the rise one mornin' blazin' into a big buffalo herd. I'd just hobbled the horses an' was unloadin' the wagons when somethin' swished through the air. First thing I knew a hemp noose settled over me an' tightened, pinnin' my elbows to my sides.

The pair of .45 Colts I packed in case the Kiowa decided to get frisky didn't do much good now. My fingers could only touch halfway up the holsters. I turned quickly and found myself starin' straight into the

bore of owlhooter Blinker Blinder's sixgun.

Shorty Harris was hangin' onto the other end of the hemp rope whilst Slam-Bang Riggs stood nearby, grinnin' mean an' holdin' his own hogleg on me. Their ponies was ground-hitched not far away. What with George's Sharps thunderin' I hadn't heard 'em ride in an' dismount.

Them three boys had a nasty rep in the buffalo country. They was known for their hankerin' for high livin' an' no taste whatever for honest work. Blinker Blinder the leader was a dark, husky young feller who got his nickname from his blinkin' eyes. His eyes didn't hinder his shootin', though. Shorty Harris was about six foot four an' rawbone, whilst Slam-Bang Riggs was built somewhat like an overgrown wrestler.

"I don't believe," I said, "that I have had the pleasure of runnin' into you boys since Ellsworth was shot up one night."

"Hank Wilkes," Blinker said to me, "if you let out one more peep you are liable to get a slug through your anatomy, the most convenient spot right now bein' your belly." Blinker motioned to Shorty an' Slam-Bang. "One of you boys stuff your bandana in Hank's kisser, an' the other tie his around Hank's head."

"You dirty son, Blinker!" I yelled. "You an' these other lizard-livered polecats better get out of our camp!"

I can't imagine how Blinker understood me, 'cause already the gag was in my mouth an' all I really said was "Glub! Glub! Glub!" Anyhow, Blinker got the idea that I was not bein' complimentary. He stepped to me an' let me have the back of his hand with full force across my face.

"Now," Blinker smiled, "let us all mosey on over the hill an' see how Georgie Wallace is comin' with his kill."

Shorty Harris give me a kick an' ordered me to get goin'. Reachin' the crest of the rise we saw Georgie down on the flat. Georgie's back was to us. His big unwieldy Sharps fifty buffalo rifle rested on a tripod which was made of three poles stuck in the ground an' tied together above with a buckskin thong. His reloadin' apparatus was at his side.

THERE was maybe two thousand buffalo in the herd. Georgie was havin' luck. I counted twenty-three that he'd already dropped, an' the rest was still grazin'. Buffalo is funny critters. They're easy to hit, but as Georgie always said, it's just a question of out-guessin' 'em, an' of knowin' their ways.

For instance, a man on foot won't stampede a herd, whilst a man on horseback *will*. Gun thunder don't seem to bother 'em 'til they scent the blood of one of their dead. Georgie was provin' this right now. A big bull started sniffin' a dead buffalo. The bull was about to raise his head an' let loose with a frenzied bawl that would start the whole herd spookin'. Georgie dropped him before the bull made a sound. The rest went on grazin'. It looked like this was to be our biggest day of huntin' in the three we'd been out.

There was just one trouble—the way things stacked up our profits was all goin' to these three jiggers who had me roped.

Of course they had emptied my holsters. Georgie had removed his sixguns for convenience durin' the kill, an' they was layin' on the grass a few feet from him. I couldn't see any way out. But it didn't dawn on me then that these boys also had murder in mind.

Georgie dropped thirty-six buffalo before too many of 'em caught the blood scent. They started pawin' the earth an' bellerin'. That was fair warnin' that the stampede was about to begin. I began squirmin' in my bindin's an' feelin' mighty uncomfortable. You can never tell which way them crazy critters is goin' to run.

Georgie grabbed his coat off the ground au' started wavin' it around his head. The buffalo swayed back an' forth uncertainly for a minute. Then the whole herd turned tail. They thundered away in the opposite direction. I sighed, relieved.

"Gallop, you humpback freaks of nature!" Georgie howled after 'em. "I'll find you tomorrow—or some of your brethren!"

He grinned, shrugged, an' started to get his stuff together.

"Thankee, Georgie," Blinker Blinder then drawled. "Thankee kindly."

Georgie straightened, turned slowly. He didn't say nothin' right off. Just stood there takin' in the situation an' I could see them sharp blue eyes of his narrow a bit.

Georgie Wallace was only twenty-one, but he was all man. A shade over six foot, he'd tip the scales at about one seventy.

The snug wool pants he wore stuffed in knee-high black boots showed the stalwartness of his legs. His flannel shirt covered wide shoulders an' deep chest, an' tapered down to a slim waist. No razor had ever slid over Georgie's lean jaws. His light brown beard was sparse an' fine.

"What with hides an' meat," Blinker continued, "bringin' an average of four dollars per buffalo I calculate me, Shorty, an' Slam-Bang will net about three hundred and fifty dollars, countin' the fifty odd animals you already got skinned an' butchered. That ain't bad."

Grinnin', the three owlhooters was sittin' on the hillside, ugly with their black whiskers an' their hair matted down beneath their sombreros. Each man had a sixgun in his hand. An' of course Shorty still held the other end of the hemp rope.

Georgie looked at me, for the first time it seemed. "Hank," he said, "you are very unhospitable, playin' around with rope an' eatin' bandanas when we have visitors. You should be servin' 'em coffee."

"Hank will serve coffee right now," Blinker said. "We wanted to see how you was comin' first."

Georgie said, "I could stand a cup myself. Let's hit for camp, boys."

Blinker laughed. "You ain't goin' to camp, Georgie," he confided. "You are goin' to join them dead buffalo in what is known as the Happy Huntin' Ground. Hank will be along to keep you company soon as he skins an' butchers them critters layin' around."

IT WAS then that I first saw my career comin' to a rapid end. I was a professional buffalo skinner whose job was also to butcher the animals, drive wagon, tend the horses, cook, an' keep general order in camp.

Georgie Wallace had made me the best proposition I'd ever had. I, an' a lot of other buffalo men, told him he was crazy. The general custom was for a hunter to hire a six or seven man crew includin' four skinners. Four or five wagons an' teams usually made up the caravan. The hunter killed all the buffalo his skinners could handle. At the end of the season his pockets was bulgin' with money—till he paid expenses. Then he usually didn't end up with much more than wages for himself.

I soon learned that Georgie Wallace was no fool. Payin' no attention to our taunts, he took me aside in Ellsworth. He showed me with pencil an' paper how we could make at least forty dollars a day apiece. He could kill as many buffalo each day as the two of us could skin an' butcher. Expenses would be cut to a minimum. We bought two wagons an' teams, an' lit out.

The fact that we steered clear of other huntin' outfits was probably the reason Blinker Blinder picked us to pull his hijackin' act on.

Georgie had taken a couple steps toward us when Blinker told him he wasn't goin' to get no coffee. Georgie stopped. He frowned mildly an' worked his tongue around in his cheeks for a moment. He always did that when he was thinkin'. Then he shoved his big black hat back on his head whilst reachin' in his shirt pocket for makin's. Thoughtfully he rolled a smoke, lit it.

"Blinker," he said finally, "I am surprised that a man with your brains would think of killin' me an' Hank today—I'm very much surprised!"

"Why?" Blinker wondered. "By the time your carcasses are found there will be many miles between here an' us."

"Oh, I don't mean that," Georgie said, blowin' out a lungful of smoke. "I mean you boys are cuttin' off your nose to spite your face."

I wondered what he was up to. He looked cool, calculatin', as the feller says. When Georgie looked that way somethin' important usually followed. I didn't know what he was up to, but I began to gather a little hope.

"To hell with this talk!" Slam-Bang Riggs snarled. He raised his gun. "I'm goin' to kill him!"

Blinker yelled, "Shut up! We'll hear him out." Blinker was the boss, so Riggs lowered his six, but not without growlin'. "Go on, Georgie," Blinker drawled. "Better make it good."

"Well," Georgie began, "fortunately the money part of this hunt don't mean nothin' to me an' Hank—"

I gurgled in protest over this black-faced lie. Georgie gave me a dirty look. But nobody but him knew what I was gurglin' about, so I reckon it didn't make much difference.

"Unfortunately the money *does* mean somethin' to me," Blinker admitted.

"Exactly," Georgie agreed. "Why fool around for three hundred an' fifty bucks when you can stick for a few days an' make fifteen hundred?"

Blinker, Shorty, an' Slam-Bang was commencin' to show interest. "Go on," Blinker ordered.

"Hank an' me," Georgie continued, "have got grub for a twenty day hunt. Splittin' it between the five of us it should last for seven more days. That's ten days of huntin' all told. We're in the thick of the buffalo now. I promise to bring our average up to thirty animals a day."

"Hold on, Georgie," Blinker interrupted. He started calculatin' on the ground with the muzzle of his gun. Pretty soon he stopped, shoved back his sombrero, an' scratched his head. "That's three hundred buffalo for the ten days at four dollars apiece, which only adds up to twelve hundred bucks. Where's the other three hundred dollars come in?"

"From the equipment," Georgie replied promptly. "We'll make you a bill of sale, an' you can sell it."

WELL, that seemed to satisfy Blinker—all but one thing. That same thing was worryin' me, too. How could Georgie explain why he made this suggestion when he knew we'd both be shot down like a couple of dogs at the end of the ten days. Blinker asked him about that.

Georgie slapped his vacant hips to show he knew full well he was unarmed an' couldn't defend himself. "A man can only die once," he shrugged. "Before I die I want to do my part in riddin' the country of these pesky buffalo. My folks in Illinois, an' a lot of other people, figger to come West an' go in the cattle business. That ain't possible while the buffalo remain to eat the grass an' ruin the land. The buffalo have got to go!"

Georgie almost had *me* convinced. I looked at Blinker an' his boys. They *was* convinced.

"We'll do it, Georgie," Blinker said. "But one funny move from either of you an' you're dead hombres. Savvy?"

I thought everything was settled 'til Slam-Bang hollered, "Hold up, Blinker! Find out how much booze they got in camp!"

Them three boys was known as among the heaviest drinkers around. I might have known the likker question would come out sooner or later. They looked at Georgie.

"You'll have to ask Hank about that," Georgie told 'em. "I never touch the stuff myself."

Slam-Bang walked to me an' started to remove my gag. By that time I was roarin' mad.

"I got three gallons o' red-eye left!" I yelled almost before my mouth was free. "But you good-for-nothin' skunks ain't gettin' a drop of it!"

A minute later I wished they'd stuffed the bandana down my throat, 'cause Slam-Bang give me a swift one in the seat of my pants. Slam-Bang could kick like a mule.

"Tch tch," Georgie clucked. "How can a man of your twenty-five years be so ignorant about hospitality, Hank? If only you will cut down your consumption of whiskey to half a pint a day there should be enough for our visitors."

"Half a pint a day is worse than no whiskey!" I retorted.

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Blinker Blinder had been doin' some more calculatin' on the ground with his gun. Now he stood up. "Then you will be very happy, Hank," he said cheerfully. "*No* whiskey is just how much you *are* goin' to get. There's no more than enough for us three boys."

That I didn't growl out loud was brought on less by Georgie's warnin' look than it was by me knowin' Slam-Bang was still behind me. But I was mad.

Blinker started barkin' orders. "Shorty, you untie Hank. He's de-fanged an' harmless, anyways. Slam-Bang, you go down an' gather Georgie's stuff, payin' special attention to them sixguns of his layin' on the grass. We'll keep our eyes on these two hombres at all times. We'll take turns standin' night watch. Shoot 'em down at the first sign of a funny move. Durin' the buffalo kills one of us'll stand behind Georgie with a sixgun jammed in his back. Never let him get you in front of that Sharps or he'll blow a hole through you big enough for a steer to walk in. All right, Georgie, you an' Hank get busy an' start skinnin' them critters."

While Blinker was talkin', Shorty an' Slam-Bang was carryin' out his orders. My arms was now free, an' I started rubbin' the soreness out of 'em caused by the tight rope.

"You don't skin buffalo with your bare hands," Georgie told Blinker. "Send Shorty to camp for our bowie knives. Also, there's one saddle horse there. We'll need him. An' we'll need that rope Shorty just took off Hank."

Shorty went, an' returned ridin' the saddle horse. "Just be careful how you handle this cutlery," he warned. handin' me an' Georgie each a knife. "Bullets travel faster than bowie knives, you know."

THE way you skin a buffalo you slit down the inside of each leg an' along the belly from throat to tail, an' cut around the neck. Then you gather the neck hide in a bunch an' tie it with a rope. You mount the saddle horse, which is hitched to the other end of the rope, an' off comes the hide. Hindquarters an' tongues is about the only meat you take. The dry crisp prairie air kept the meat in good shape until you could get it to a buyer.

"Georgie," I said, as we got to work, "you ought to be on the stage. You was shakin' with emotion an' tears was in your eyes while you was hollerin' that this prairie has got to become a cow country. Them boys sure swallowed your hokum."

"It ain't hokum, Hank," Georgie said. "The buffalo got to go."

"Haw! Haw!" I scoffed. "Man couldn't wipe 'em off this continent in a million years!"

Georgie said, "You're wrong. I figger to bring my folks out here an' own me a cattle ranch some day."

"Well," I said, "you better start bein' a cowman within seven days, 'cause after then you will be a dead one."

"We got a seven-day lease on life," Georgie reminded me. "Maybe somethin' will happen. Meanwhile, stop givin' them boys any back talk."

"You got a plan to save our necks?" I asked.

Just then Blinker hollered down from the hillside, "Quit that jawin', you two, an' get on with your work!"

We had our first hide ready for yankin', an' Georgie climbed on the horse.

"Don't try no getaway!" Blinker warned. "Bullets travel faster than ***horses,*** too!"

While we was skinnin' I spent the whole day buildin' up hopes that Georgie had a plan to outwit Blinker. While Georgie was helpin' me with the dishes after supper that night I asked him about it again.

Then all hope left me.

"I'm sorry, Hank," Georgie said. "I got no plan."

Well sir, I never put in seven days of such unholy torture in my life. Shorty an' Slam-Bang stayed middlin' drunk most of the time. Drinkin' didn't seem to make much change in 'em except they got even meaner than usual. Slam-Bang's delight was to plant a swift one in the seat of my pants every time I turned my back. An' one day him an' Shorty had a contest. The idea was to see which one could kick up dust with their sixguns closest to my feet without hittin' 'em.

But what made me madder'n anything was watchin' them coyotes soak up my good fifteen-dollar-a-gallon likker.

Georgie wasn't havin' no picnic either. One mornin' followin' a stand with his Sharps, Blinker Blinder walked to him,

grabbed Georgie's arm an' spun him around.

"You could've dropped a half dozen more!" Blinker roared. "You let 'em stampede too soon!"

Georgie had already killed forty buffalo, which was almost more than we'd have time to skin. Before Georgie could explain this, Blinker's big fist went smashing into his face. Drinkin' never deducted from Blinker's strength, or in any other way. Most men would have gone down under the blow. Georgie staggered back, but stood his ground. I could see his long fingers workin', an' his lips quiverin'. Blood trickled down his beard. But he never said a word.

THAT afternoon we was about half done with the skinnin' an' was far enough away from Blinker, Shortly, an' Slam-Bang to talk soft without them hearin' us.

"Hank," Georgie said, "I want you to keep your eyes an' ears open. The buffalo have got to go. So do men like these three skunks. If they don't the West will never amount to anything. I thought we might talk Blinker into takin' our property an' lettin' us live. But I know now that's out. In the first place they're killers. In the second place they figger if we live we'll gun 'em down later or send the marshal after 'em."

I nodded while slittin' a bull up the belly. "We only got four days to go," I said, "an' them boys is gettin' meaner all the time. Georgie, we're about done for."

"Maybe not," Georgie said. He rose to mount while I tied the rope to the hide. "Can you climb a tree, Hank?" he asked.

I looked at him funny. "I dunno," I said. "I never tried."

"You'll mebby have your first chance," he told me. "Anyhow, you keep as near a tree as possible durin' the kills. An' don't hobble the horses too good."

The next few days was even worse than before. On the fifth day Blinker, Shorty, an' Slam-Bang ran out of my whiskey. They was so mad they took it out on me an' Georgie in every conceivable way they kicked us and hit us, an' even cut our rations down to barely enough to live on.

Of course we had to move camp each day in order to follow the herds. Georgie conducted the kills same as ever—except one thing. I noticed that when the stampede began, Georgie didn't stand up an' wave his coat around in the air to shoo the buffalo the other way, like he always did before. It was then that it dawned on me what he had in mind.

I had seen hunting parties gored to death under the hooves of them fear-locoed critters before. I knew now why Georgie warned me to keep near a tree.

It was the eighth night of the hunt, the fifth night Blinker an' his boys had been with us. They had grabbed most of our blankets, an' me an' Georgie were forced to huddle together under one blanket.

"Georgie," I said, "them critters are just liable to stampede in our direction."

"That's what I'm hopin'," he agreed.

"I will stand a good chance of escape," I admitted. "But you will be the first one they strike. You had better forget about it an' start wavin' your coat again."

"Don't worry about me," Georgie said. "An' don't mention it again. I don't want Blinker, Shorty, an' Slam-Bang to get suspicious. Now, shut up, Hank, as I want to go to sleep."

Next morning durin' the kill, I thought Georgie's trick was goin' to work. His system had always been to pick the biggest buffalo of the herd an' kill 'em leisurely. This time he shot 'em in a bunch at random. A cow was first to smell blood. She bellowed an' pawed. Georgie could have dropped her easy. But he didn't. The stampede soon began. I began lookin' around for the handiest tree. I thought they were comin' straight for us. But they swerved off at an angle.

With them went another chance, a slim one, to save our necks—or mine, rather. I couldn't see how Georgie would stand a chance to get out alive. And there was only one day left.

AND that was the mornin' it happened. As luck had it we were able to make camp near the shade of a big cottonwood. I could hear Georgie's Sharps thunderin' beyond the next hill. Shorty Harris was guardin' him that mornin' an' I knew Shorty wasn't more'n a dozen feet behind Georgie. Blinker Blinder had left Slam-Bang Riggs to keep an eye on me while Blinker went to the hilltop where he could watch the kill an' the camp at the same time.

I was cleanin' up the mornin' dishes, with Slam-Bang hangin' close by.

I looked longin'ly at our two wagons on which was big stacks of buffalo hides an' meat. I was dreamin' of the dollars they would be turned into, an' was mad, realizin' that them three skunks would be spendin' the money. I guess I was mutterin' to myself.

"What you growlin' about?" Slam-Bang inquired, an' stepped menacingly toward me.

Just then he stopped short. The bellowin' from beyond the hill told us that the stampede had commenced.

I straightened, looked to the hill. Blinker had been sittin' down. Now he rose. He stood a moment lookin' down the other side of the hill. Suddenly he turned toward us. Blinker broke into a gallop I never thought a man capable of.

"Run like hell!" he yelled, an' there was fear in his voice. "The buffalo are spookin' this way! They've already got Georgie an' Shorty!"

So they'd got Georgie. I remember one sob breakin' from me as I started for Slam-Bang. Riggs was unnerved, scared to death. Before he regained senses, I had both his sixguns in my hands. He give me one fearful look, then headed for the cottonwood.

"Get away from that tree, Slam-Bang!" I hollered.

He turned. I think for the first time he realized I had his guns.

Slam-Bang wasted no time in goin'. Blinker was still runnin' hell-bent down the hill. They tried for their horses which were hobbled but movin' fast. I'd slashed the hobbles in hopes they'd break. They did. That frenzied buffalo bellerin' had reached the horses. They were gone. No man or buffalo could catch them now.

There was nothin' I could do for poor Georgie. Revenge was my only satisfaction. I shoved Slam-Bang's guns in my pockets an' shinnied up the cottonwood as the first line of the herd appeared on the hill.

I was watchin' Blinker Blinder's race for life. It was a good race, but Blinker lost. He went down under those sharp hooves, howling like the coward he was. Hundreds more hooves climbed over his body, but Blinker never knew.

From the tree I watched Slam-Bang runnin' like mad. He had a fair start. But if the buffalo missed him it wouldn't make any difference. I would track him down an' watch him die under his own guns.

I TURNED then to see how the herd was comin', an' what I saw almost made me fall out of the tree. The foremost bull was a huge one. Must have measured five feet high at the shoulders. An' I'll be a horn-swoggled low-down skinner if there wasn't Georgie Wallace on that critter's back hangin' to the horns!

Georgie was ridin' the herd out! I'd heard of it before, but I'd never seen it done!

I don't know whether you can guide a buffalo or not. Maybe Georgie did. I wouldn't put *anything* past him. Anyhow, that bull headed straight for the cottonwood I was perched on. Right underneath, Georgie suddenly let go of the critter's horns. He grabbed a low-hangin' limb an' hoisted himself up beside me.

"I thought you was dead!" I greeted above the bawlin' of the herd.

"I was watchin' that big bull all through the kill!" Georgie yelled back. "He was close to me so I saved him for a ride! When the stampede started I climbed on!"

Georgie told me later he could have dropped the bull anytime. So that critter owed his life to Georgie, an' Georgie made him pay by savin' his own.

I didn't have to go gunnin' after Slam-Bang. The buffalo got him, same as they got Blinker an' Shorty.

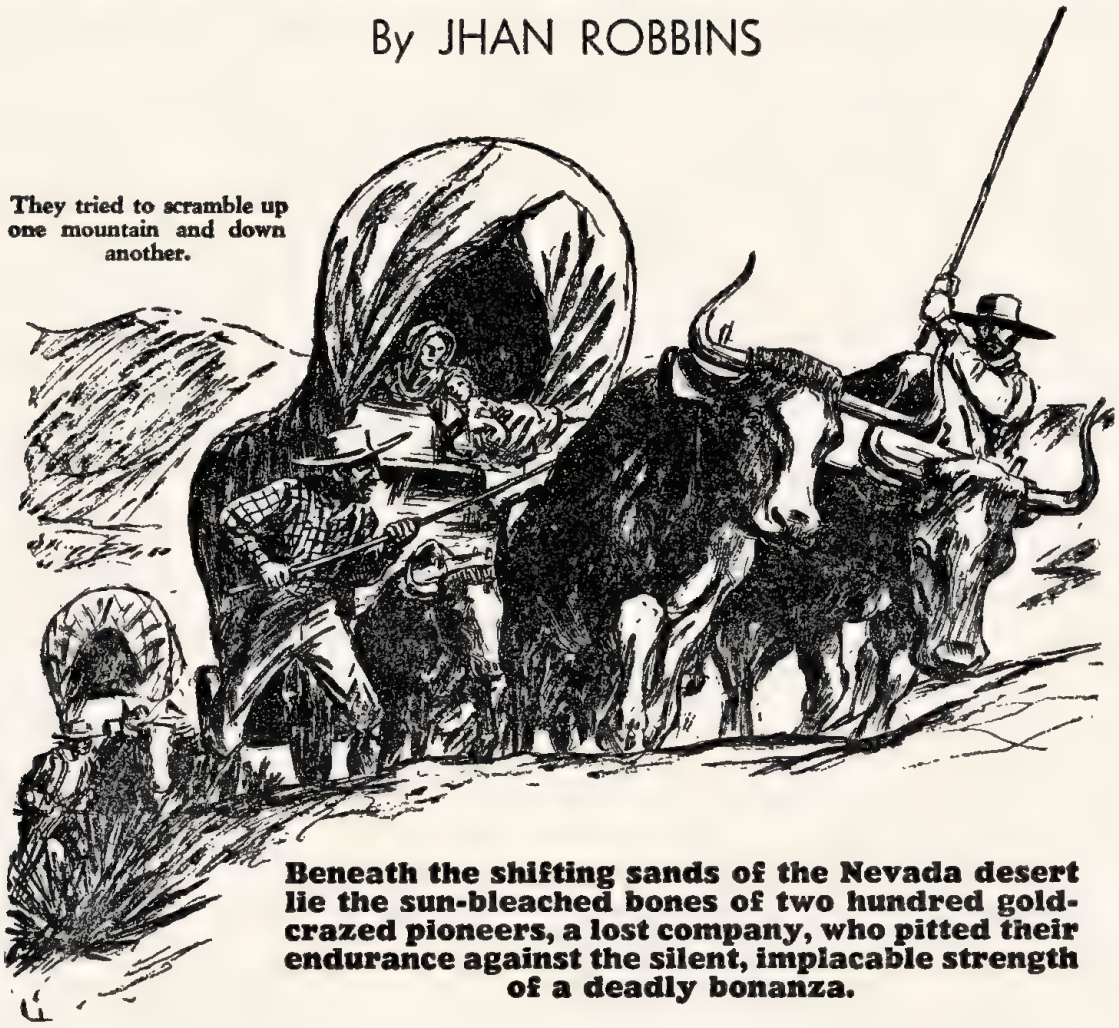
Me an' Georgie spent the rest of the mornin' roundin' up the horses. The afternoon we spent skinnin' the buffalo from the mornin's kill. The stampedin' herd had busted up our wagons considerable when it thundered through camp, but we patched 'em up for the time bein'. The hides an' meat was all in good shape.

Next day we broke camp. "We'll have to tell the boys in town that Blinker, Shorty, an' Slam-Bang are defunct," Georgie remarked as we headed back for Ellsworth. "I wonder just what kind of celebration they will have."

"I dunno," I told him, "an' I don't care. But after them boys forcin' me on a water diet for seven days I know dang well what kind of celebration *I* am goin' to have!"

Their Bones Mark the Trail

By JHAN ROBBINS



They tried to scramble up one mountain and down another.

Beneath the shifting sands of the Nevada desert lie the sun-bleached bones of two hundred gold-crazed pioneers, a lost company, who pitted their endurance against the silent, implacable strength of a deadly bonanza.

UNDERNEATH the shifting sands of the Nevada deserts lie two hundred sun-whitened skeletons crumbling to blanched dust after a century in the fierce sun. They died in tortured attitudes, hands outstretched upon the glittering crystal hills. Beside them are the heavy bones of four hundred oxen and horses, mixed with the charred ashes of prairie wagons, proud ships of the desert that went down with all hands.

In the spring of 1849 these were happy, smiling people . . . hardy men and women pioneers who lived on the western edge of the Utah Territory. They worked hard on their small farms, prayed daily, paid their taxes and sent their children to school, asking little more than to live under free skies and to stand four-square in the eyes of their neighbors and their God.

Then something happened. In early June they heard that people were digging gold out of the earth in California. They heard that in one day, a man might dig up enough to make him rich for life . . . in one day, a man could make more money than a Utah farmer would see in a million years. And if a man had a good strong wife, who could help dig, why. . . .

"Gosh, durn it," they mused, "there's no limit a-tall to what a man could do, once he got out there to Californy!"

After that, some of the zest and vigor went out of farming. Old man Bennett could be seen resting on his hoe, gazing out across the western hills, and his neighbor,

Bill Manley, came to stand beside him. The horizon began to sparkle with a strange, yellow lustre, and lust for gold grew in their eyes.

By October, the gold-fever had infected the whole settlement, had spread until it was something like a panic. One after the other families sold their farms, or even left them flat, and packed all their earthly goods into lumbering Conestoga wagons. The train was made up of a number of parties and a few individual wagons. New arrivals from the East joined them, including a group of adventurous young men who called themselves The Jayhawkers. The groups banded together into a loosely-formed semi-military organization dubbed The Sand Walking Company. They asked an experienced scout named Jefferson Hunt to guide them into the Land of Gold.

"I'll take you across," Hunt said, "but you'll have to wait until the warm weather."

"But we want to get there in a hurry!" they shouted, already feeling the smooth gold between their palms.

"No white man can cross the Sierra's in the winter," the old scout reminded them. "Remember the Donners?" The men and women shuddered. The Donner Party had tried to cut straight west across the towering Sierra Nevada range the previous winter. It was not until April that their frozen, wasted bodies were uncovered by the melting snows and washed down the mountain sides by the spring freshets.

But still, men were getting rich in California, and no one had any intention of staying in Salt Lake City until spring. Hunt finally proposed to take them southwest to San Bernardino, California, a route that had been broken by General John Fremont and his troupers, but never before attempted by a whole wagon train. It was a dangerous idea, full of hardships. Still, it was not impossible, and Jeff Hunt probably would have led the entire two hundred safely into California had it not been for two common human sins: greed and impatience.

THE Sand Walking Company set off from Little Salt Lake in early November at a stiff pace. Everyone was gay and good-humored . . . and in a hurry. Great whips cracked over the broad backs of the oxen and the tops of the heavily loaded wagons swayed and creaked as they rolled over the swelling hills that led to the southern mountains. For five days they pushed toward the beckoning slopes. Every night when they built their campfires the mountains looked only a few miles away —and every morning in the bright sunlight the mountains looked more remote than ever. The drivers began to question the scout, "How long? How many more days?"

Then someone produced a map. It was a beautiful map, showing a much shorter route to California, and grass meadows, smooth ground and watering places were marked in all the way. It was drawn, most historians agree, by an Indian chief. If so, he must have had a good laugh over his little joke.

Hunt distrusted the fancy map. He argued that while few men had ever been over the route he was leading them, at least some people had succeeded in crossing it and it was known that it could be done. No one, he reasoned, had ever found any direct western pass over the Sierras, "and no one ever will," he added.

But there was a lot of discussion and the lure of quick wealth carried a big weight. "We can be panning gold in six weeks," argued one who favored the new map. The brash young Jayhawkers, fresh from the East, were the ones who were sniffing loudly at the idea of hardship, eager to get to California as fast as possible, and some one hundred seventy-five of the Utah-ites elected to follow them. Only a dozen stuck with Hunt. The long wagon train snaked out toward the cut-off—Hunt's followers turned south, waved farewell to the gold-crazed Jayhawkers and their comrades. They never saw them again.

Something was wrong with the new map. The Jayhawkers came at once to a deep canyon, and could find no way around it. Finally, they backtracked north, after wasting nearly a week sitting on the edge of the cut, then turned and jolted south into the depths of Nevada, into the flaming desert.

Through November and December they wandered in the stifling heat. They were without water, their food gave out. Oxen dropped in the forsaken wasteland, the flesh rotted as they fell, and the desperate men and women ate the animals and sucked the sides for salt. Ruthlessly, they stole food

and water from each other. No man stretched out a helping hand to his comrade. The young men in the Jayhawkers stood off the family men with guns because they didn't want women and children slowing them down. Tongues swelled and mouths cracked open, they died whispering for water.

On Christmas Day, 1849, those who were still alive reached the floor of Death Valley, and there their condition was hopeless. They had brought civilization to the desert, and the desert had stripped their civilization from them as though it were thin veneer. They were little more than animals, stealing and looting and killing, but they were stubborn animals, with their faces still turned to the west and the lust for gold still gleaming in their parched eyes.

NO WHITE man had ever seen this country. They had no idea where they were. They could fight Indians, hunger, thirst—endure any hardship with the iron blood that was in them—but they tried to lick Geography, and it had beaten them. Instead of drifting comfortably, if slowly, down the southwesterly valleys to the coast, they had tried to scramble up one mountain, down the other, up the next mountain and down the other side, seeking a "short cut" that just didn't exist. Like Columbus, they underestimated the length of the trip. From Salt Lake, they could see only one line of distant hills—how could they know that there were five mountain ranges between them and the coast? But they were like ants after honey—gold lay to the west, and west they would go until they dropped. Wagons were abandoned, but the precious oxen were painfully driven up the mountains and lowered over the cliffs by thick ropes.

In Death Valley, they were desperate. It was everyone for himself and the devil and the buzzards take the rest. At Furnace Creek Wash, a spring of warm but drinkable water, they found an Indian cache of melons and other food. They fell on it and stole it all. Then, terrified of a revengeful Indian raid, they scattered deeper into the steaming desert, to a place called Devil's Cornfield. That night, several of the young men who called themselves The Jayhawkers stole all the remaining supplies and vanished. They were quickly buried by the furnace winds and the sliding sand.

By January tenth, there were left only fifteen of the original two hundred. Bill Manley, Old Man Bennett and his wife and child, the Wade family, the Brier family, the Arcanes, and a young man named Rogers. With a last desperate gesture toward communal spirit, they met in council and selected Manley and Rogers to scout ahead, stabbing across the boiling sands toward the distant Panamints. Manley and Rogers staggered out on foot; the company settled down to starvation. Les Brier had two feeble oxen left, the Wades still had their wagon although their horses had died a few days before. Brier awoke that dawn to find himself looking into Wade's pistol.

"I'm taking your ox," Wade gritted, "and I'm gettin' outa here." He hitched up and rolled out of the camp, and of the one hundred seven that started out, this was the only wagon that got through into California. Wade turned south, acting sensibly for the first time in three months, and came out at the bottom of the desert, going around the mountains and into the fertile San Fernando Valley.

When Rogers and Manley returned, only the Arcanes and the Bennetts were alive to greet them.

"There's a way out of here if you can make it," Manley told his old neighbor, and together the two who had stood in their Utah fields together and dreamed of gold struggled across the desert and climbed the Panamints into fair country again. As they clambered over the top of the range, Mrs. Bennett looked back at the seared desert floor where they had suffered so horribly and where so many had perished.

"Good-bye, Death Valley," she said bitterly, and the name has remained to this day.

In a few short weeks the Bennetts, the Arcanes, and the two young men emerged onto the Pacific Coast. They made their way up to the Sacramento and lived to raise their grandchildren. But it's sworn by every historian who has traced their fatal trail that not one single member of the Sand Walking Company who survived the ordeal of the mountains and the desert ever succeeded in finding gold in California.

Kelsey picked her up and floundered on down the slope.

DEATH-SONG FOR BLIZZARD OUTCASTS

By GIFF CHESHIRE

A pair of desperate, starvation fugitives, Kelsey and the Kid had but one chance for survival—by riding out their lives as hunted outcasts, shunned and hated by all honest men!

THE storm whipping down over the Graybacks created a hollow moan in the mouth of the cave. The one man in the cave listened attentively. His hollow eyes were lustrous as the dying fire cast its last glowing flames. To him it was a storm without end. The whole world was a storm, vicious and without mercy.

"God's Palm!" he muttered to himself. "It shows the devil's hand!"

Bent Kelsey had been storm-bound in the cave for more hours than he cared to

remember. Not only did he have to fight the bitter thoughts that were plaguing him but also the hunger that gnawed within him.

God's Palm! Once it had been lavish with those who had come to settle among its rolling, fertile hills. It possessed everything a man could ask for, natural water and pasture grass, rich black soil in limitless acres and, so it had seemed in the first years, a mild and mellow climate. Then oppression and famine had been turned loose in the land, three blizzard winters, three summers of blistering, killing draught.

The first year had wiped out the less provident. The solid folk, those equipped with the power to recover from adversity if given a fair chance, were as helpless as the rest. Now, in the third winter, the women folk were pinched and worried in the farflung ranchhouses, while the men were dour and despairing as they surveyed the wreckage of their high hopes.

Kelsey no longer cared a great deal, not because he had fared better than any of the others, but because he had finally admitted defeat. He had abandoned, some months earlier, what had been a promising spread and had bucked the storm seeking work. But there was no work to be had! Neither cowman nor farmer could offer him more than regrets, sometimes a meal and a night's lodging.

KELSEY had declined the latter offers because he was still a proud man despite all his ill luck. He had ended up here in the cave above Johnson's Creek a few days earlier. The last of his carefully husbanded food was gone by then, and the last of his coffee was now stewing in the tin pot.

There was no work. "No *honest* work," Kelsey corrected himself, with a thin grin. There was work of another sort, the sort he had foresworn four years earlier when he settled on his claim in Goose Hollow. There was the bank in Graysville that would be a simple job if only he had a man to side him.

He had been good at bank robbing in the past, why not now? He remembered how happy he was when he settled in Goose Hollow, far from his former activities. He was a tall, dour man, whose lean face had been carefully schooled to conceal the turbulence that often was within him. In his early teens he had left an eastern orphanage, and gone westward with the great tides. Slowly he started to follow the owlhoot trails. Then a strong will sent him along an honest path again.

He had found peace that first year in Goose Hollow. But that was short lived, it was soon followed by famine years. So he was in revolt once more, yet this time with little choice in the matter. He had never been this hungry before, never this low on hope. Kelsey knew something must happen soon.

There was the bank in Graysville. It offered him a chance to get enough money to leave this part of the country. He tried not to think of how it would set him on the owlhoot trail once again.

A few days earlier he had ridden into Graysville, proud and silent, managing an air that belied his sorry plight. That moment was the first time in four years he had been tempted to resort to the old skills.

The bank stood in the middle of the town, and nobody but a fool would attempt to stick it up alone. He had studied the situation detachedly at first, merely as a problem to divert his mind from its brooding thought. And the old thrill had stirred automatically, the feverish response to a high challenge. Without conscious decision, he had known suddenly that he was going to try it. He crept out of town before anyone had seen him closely enough to recognize him again.

Now, stormbound in the cave, he was beginning to realize what robbing the bank would mean. He argued with himself that he had little choice in the matter if he wanted to eat.

The racket of the storm covered the sounds of approach, and Kelsey was aware of nothing until the figure stood in the mouth of the cave, dimly highlighted by the snow-filled sky beyond. His brooding had evoked the old jumpiness, and Kelsey came erect with a start, then relaxed slowly.

He could tell at a glance that it was only a kid, a smooth cheeked, slender boy, who was nearly tuckered out. The lad stood stock still for a moment, braced against the stone, looking at Kelsey. His gaze knifed around the cave.

Kelsey read it all, the furtiveness of manner, the brittleness of eye and gesture. He was long accustomed to this, and it had

once been his. Here was a wolf whelp, pitched up before him by the storm. Kelsey grinned. Not quite what he had asked for, but it would suffice.

The button mistook the grin for a welcome and grinned back. "Can I come in, mister?"

"Sure, kid." Kelsey climbed to his feet and brought more of the wood he had gathered and freshened up the fire.

The kid came on into the cave, weaving as he walked. Kelsey saw that his gloveless hands were blue with cold. The kid stretched them to the fire. "God, I'm cold. Nearly froze."

"Take the coat off, kid. Strip down so the warmth can get through."

There wasn't much snow on the kid's boots, so he must have ridden here. Kelsey's pulses leaped with the hope that he had food in his kit. He built up the fire and poured a tin cup full of coffee, which he handed to the other.

The kid took it in clumsy hands, his eyes studying Kelsey, strengthening the man's suspicion that he was a product of the owlhoot. Neither asked any questions.

"Sorry I ain't got a plate of beans to offer yuh, kid," Kelsey said. "Got caught here by the storm, and I'm plumb outta grub."

He saw the disappointment that flickered in the boy's eyes, his own spirits plummeting. The kid swallowed. "Reckon I can't help much, mister. I ain't had anything to eat for three days." Spirit flared in him suddenly. "By damn, mister, if I ever get outta this fix, I ain't ever going to be hungry again!"

KELSEY hunkered by the fire, watching the smoke that curled upward to disappear through a crack in the overhead. The kid was even younger than he had thought, and his voice hadn't changed yet. Still, most wolf whelps were as good as a man any day in matters such as Kelsey had in mind.

"Maybe you and me can do business," he said presently. "Maybe we can fix things so we won't either one be hungry, for a while at least. My name's Bent Kelsey. What's yours?"

The boy hesitated for a second, but Kelsey's own frankness seemed to have disarmed him. "Sandy Lathrop."

"Which direction did you come from?"

"North."

Kelsey's jaw hinged involuntarily. "What? You came over the pass in this storm?"

Sandy Lathrop nodded. "And, mister, it was a stinker!"

Kelsey was ready to admit that. He looked at Sandy suddenly with liking. The kid had stripped off his slicker and jacket and floppy black hat. His faded blue shirt and Levis were ragged but clean. His tawny, uncut hair spilled over his thin face, giving him an elfin look. Sandy Lathrop had the stuff, no matter what kind of a pack he had been forced to run with.

The man watched the boy closely while he told him about the bank. Sandy listened carefully. "Your part'll be to watch the street, kid," he said. "Think you can cut it?"

"Sure, Kelsey. But criminy! I'd rather hit a grocery store! You can't eat money."

"There'll be groceries, but you'll have to cinch your belt a little more first."

Sandy sighed. "I reckon I can stand another notch if I have to."

He was growing sleepy from the warmth of the cave, Kelsey saw, and chances were he had rested no more recently than he had taken food. Kelsey kicked out his soogans.

"Flop, kid. We can't do anything before morning, anyhow, and you'll need a steady nerve."

Sandy moved groggily to the crude bed, dropped onto it while he wrestled off his sodden boots. Then he stretched out and was instantly asleep.

Elation filled Bent Kelsey, and his earlier doubts were forgotten now. With Sandy's help the Graysville bank would be a dead cinch. They would hit it as soon as it opened for business and be on their way. If it was still snowing it would be all the better.

He sat for a long while perfecting his plans and the route they would take afterward. Then his gaze fell on Sandy Lathrop, and he blinked his eyes. He couldn't believe what he saw.

The button had relaxed, arms flung wide. As he stared, it dawned on Kelsey with staggering import that Sandy was a girl.

The discovery alarmed him. Bent Kel-

sey had had little to do with the opposite sex. Yet it was not only his shyness that troubled him now. Whatever this Sandy's experience had been, he could not use her as he had planned, some deep sense of chivalry revolting. He whirled away in sudden anger. Instead of helping, this had greatly complicated matters, for he knew that he could not turn the girl loose again in the storm.

BEFORE it got too dark to see, Kelsey put on his own wraps and emerged from the cave. He found Sandy's ground-reined horse and led it to the locust copse where he had sheltered his own and where the snow was shallow enough that the animals could paw down to grass. For a long moment he was tempted to saddle his own mount and ride, leaving the girl and the fresh problem she had posed behind, but presently he turned back toward the cave.

Darkness fell, sealing the cave mouth with a sable stopper. Kelsey brought in a bucketful of snow and melted it down. But he left the last coffee in the pot for Sandy when she awakened.

She stirred presently and opened her eyes, exhausted to the point where sound, uninterrupted sleep was impossible. Kelsey did not tell her of his discovery, some instinct warning him that she would feel more at ease if she believed her secret secure.

"How come you were out in this, Sandy?" he asked.

Her eyes went bleak. She regarded him solemnly, and after a long moment she said, "I run away. From Pink Daley. He was my stepfather, and a skunk! I got sick of it—so sick I had to get out of there!"

"And your mother?"

"I can't even remember her." Then, with rising feeling, she resumed. "Pinkey Daley fancied himself for a curly wolf, but he was pure coyote. Nobody'd ever side him for long. We was outcast by outcasts, Kelsey! I got sick of it, and the owlhoot! So I started out!"

"You say you're sick of the owlhoot? How come you're ready to side me?"

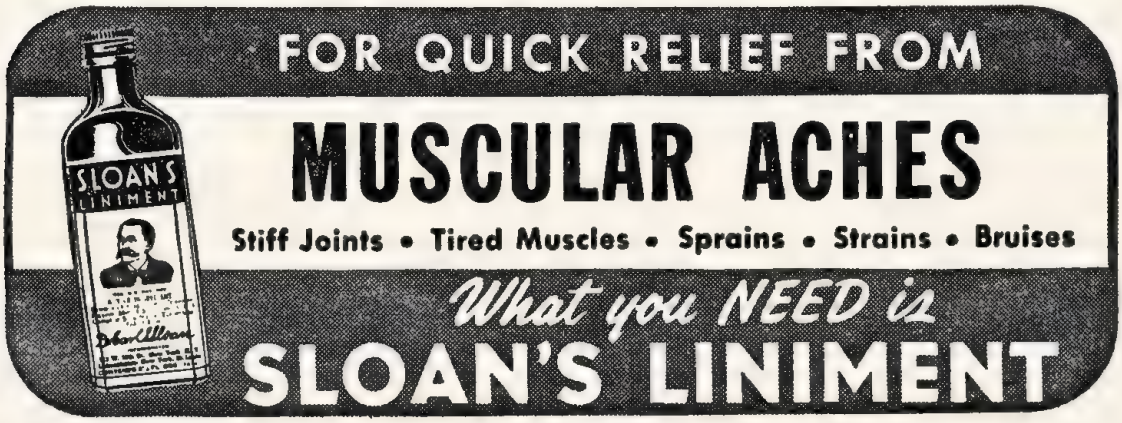
"Yeah, I know. It sounds funny. But I nearly froze and I got so danged hungry, coming over the pass, I swore I'd get me a stake somehow, on my own. I ain't backin' out, Kelsey." She grinned in sudden embarrassment. "But you been square with me, so far, and I reckon I got to treat you the same. I ain't a boy, like you think, Kelsey."

"Yeah, I know. How old are you, Sandy?"

"Nineteen."

And Sandy was asleep again. Kelsey stirred up the fire, slowly and thoughtfully. Nineteen sounded young, but he well knew how much could be packed into that many years in the kind of life she must have known. He himself was less than thirty, yet he felt as if his own bitter youth were decades behind.

He gave up thought of robbing the Graysville bank, his mind swinging abruptly to an idea Sandy had planted there when she remarked that she would rather have groceries than money. He would get her groceries, tonight. The mercantile in Graysville would not be hard to break into, but such a venture would rouse the town, when it was discovered in the morning, and make the bank job entirely too risky to under-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take. He would get a grubstake for her, leave it here in the cave while she still slept off her exhaustion, and be on his own way. She could wait out the storm in security, and what happened to her after that was no concern of his.

He thought suddenly of the ranch in distant Goose Hollow, and it occurred to him that with enough food to pinch out the winter he might be able to return to it and still manage to make a go of things somehow. He could take both horses to the store, and pick his loot carefully. All at once he realized what he would do.

He was surprised at the weight that lifted from him at the decision, equally surprised that the thought of stealing food was less offensive to him than the thought of stealing money.

WHILE he waited for complete darkness, Kelsey took stock of the distant and abandoned Circle K. There were still forty or fifty head of steers he had turned loose to graze before he rode out seeking work. They were worthless now because of the shot market but would be seed for a new start. His barns and sheds and the shack were new and sound. It was basically a good set-up, a beautiful, well-watered little valley, if only the weather would abate enough to give a man a chance.

In spite of his hunger, Kelsey felt better than he had felt in a long time. He knew that by morning he would be packing off in that direction, with a grub-stake and fresh determination.

It was dark enough to leave now. Sandy had sunken into a deep, refreshening sleep at last, and he knew it would be many hours before she awakened. He threw fresh fuel onto the fire and then he went out.

He had dug his own saddle out of the snow and was cinching it onto the roan when he heard a rustling sound. It was soft at first and seemed to be at a great distance. Then it grew to a rumble and a roar, and he wheeled in quick alarm.

Snowslide!

The briefest of study told him that it was coming down the mountainside above the cave, heading in his direction. But he had no thought for himself. Flailing his hat, he slapped the horses, startling them into quick movement. Then he spun and raced up the sharp incline toward the cave.

He floundered in the deep snow in his haste, went down, rose to struggle on. There was no chance that Sandy would be awakened by the noise. He gained the mouth of the cave and plunged inside.

"Sandy! Sandy!"

The girl came awake in quick fright, looking at him puzzledly. Kelsey had scooped up her wraps and boots, but there was no time for her to don them.

"The snow—it's coming down on us!"

The roar was thunderous in their ears as they plunged toward the opening. It was like the spilling of flour for a split second, then stones plunged past the entrance. Kelsey held the girl back, hung for an instant in indecision. Before he could move again, the slide plunged over the opening.

The roaring grew greater, and the very rock that surrounded them seemed to tremble. There was no telling how deep that snow would be piled before it was over. He looked briefly at the fissure in the overhead that had carried away the smoke from the fire, wondering if the up-creeping warmth had started the slide. He saw that the cave was already starting to fill with smoke, showing that the opening had been plugged. Reluctantly he threw the water he had got from melting snow onto the coals, extinguishing them.

In the overwhelming blackness that followed, Sandy emitted a low moan but beyond that she made no sound. Kelsey fumbled, handing her her boots.

"Slip into 'em. We've got to start digging. It doesn't look like the air'll last very long."

HE GROPED in the darkness until he found the bucket again. His mind was staggered with the enormity of the task that lay ahead, and he acknowledged that it might be impossible. But it was their only hope, for waiting, if it did not bring suffocation, would bring starvation, for nobody knew they had been in the cave. It would be months before the snow melted naturally.

Kelsey fell to work with tight-lipped energy. The stuff was soft, easy digging, but there was no telling how much of it there was nor if the oxygen supply would last as long as the task. He scooped the bucket full with powerful sweeps of his arms, and as the tunnel began to gain depth

he was obliged to pass the bucket back in the dark so that Sandy could empty it in the cave. The space that confined them grew unbelievably hot, and sweat began to stream from him.

He cut the hole no larger than he needed to, and from time to time he crept back over the space he had covered, carefully feeling the walls with his hands to make sure he had not turned off in the wrong direction. After a time they were far enough in the drift that Sandy began dumping the bucket behind her to save time, so that presently they were sealed in the middle of the great snow mass.

Her sobs grew too loud presently for him to pretend not to hear. He found her shoulder and patted it, then fell to work with renewed will. It seemed an interminable time that the process of scooping and passing went on and the stifling terror of their prison began to evidence itself in his own nerves. Then presently the bucket gave suddenly, sweeping through into emptiness, and he knew they were free.

The moon was out, with a galaxy of stars, brightening the whole majestic sweep of God's Palm.

"Oh, Bent! We made it—we're still alive!"

All he could mumble was, "Yes."

He could not understand the emotions he now felt. He turned toward her. Without a sound, she crumpled and fell to the snow.

Kelsey picked her up and floundered on down the slant. Something he had heard her say and had paid scant attention to now rang in his ears, "By damn, mister, if I ever get outta this fix, I ain't ever going to be hungry again!"

She hadn't really told him how long she had gone without food, nor of the real ordeal of the Grayback pass. But that, with the last hours of terror, had been too much for her. He had to get her to help, he had to take her in to Greysville.

That would mean the end of his recent, tonic scheme for grubstaking his return to the Circle K, for after having shown his face in Graysville he would be taking too much of a chance if he tried to pull off the robbery later. Yet Bent Kelsey's movement did not falter, presently, when he laid Sandy beneath a pine tree and started out to find the horses.

WHEN dawn broke over Graysville, it brought the first sign in weeks that the storm was abating. Kelsey lay on the horsehair couch in the living room of Doc Large's house, but he had not slept. Sandy was in bed in the next room. When Kelsey had stumbled across his porch the night before and roused the household, the doc took one look at the situation and had known what to do. Food, warmth and stimulants had done the trick.

"Bent! You awake?" It was Sandy's carefully lowered voice.

Bent Kelsey climbed to his feet. He was glad she was awake, for he wanted to talk to her before the doc's family was up. He crossed to the bedroom door. Sandy pointed to the window near the head of her bed.

"Look, Bent! Daylight—air!"

Kelsey nodded. He had to tell her now she was in safe hands, and that he would be on his way. He had to do this without telling her that she had taught him that food was more valuable than money, and finally that life was better than food. He was straight on that for the first time in his life, and she mustn't know that she had taught him.

He began by telling her of the Circle K and the slim chance it still offered him. He told her about the scattered cattle he had left to fend for themselves, and the tight buildings and the beautiful little valley he was returning to.

"Take me with you!" Sandy said.

"But . . . !" He was staggered at the elation that surged through him. "But it means starvation! It'd be worse than what you've been used to!"

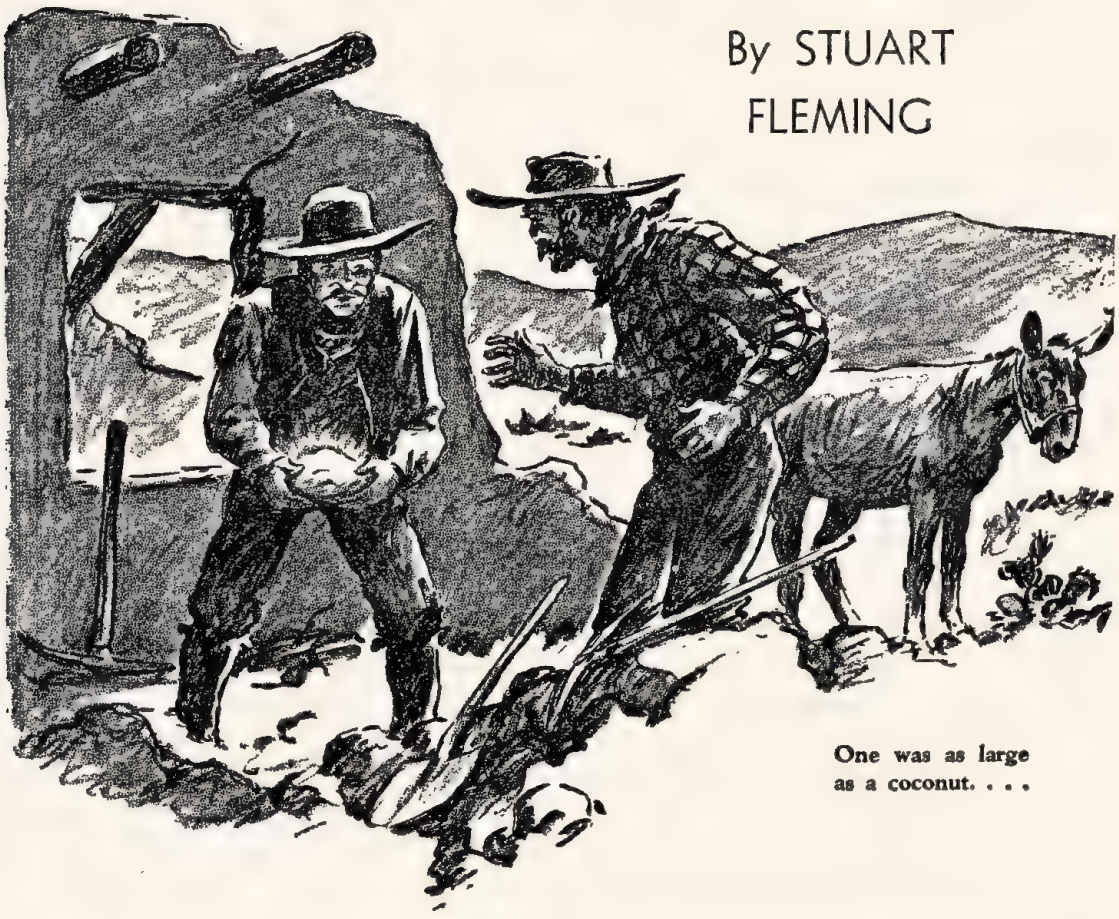
Sandy smiled. "It means life, Bent! We found out that it means the most to us! It means—" She paused in sudden confusion, and abruptly the brittle look he had first noticed in her came back. "Drat it, mister, I'd druther you said it!"

Kelsey did not answer for a long moment, not because he was undecided but because he was astounded at what was happening inside of him. His eyes searched hers, and he saw the answer there with startling clarity.

"Life," he said. "Life—and love."

The Silver of Silent Men

By STUART FLEMING



One was as large as a coconut. . . .

The curse of the Lost Frenchman Mine can never be lifted. . . . Whoever finds its fabulous treasures must die before he reveals its location!

CALIFORNIA sunshine poured down on the wharf at San Diego. It was a summer day in 1854. The heat had driven most people to shelter, but from the passenger deck of the Pacific Mail Steamship *Senator,* several pairs of eyes watched a curious procession come slowly along the dock.

First came a stocky, blond-bearded man, riding a burro and carrying the lead ropes of two others. These, plodding along in his wake, were heavily burdened with large canvas sacks, three lashed to one animal and two to the other. In the rear, riding a fourth burro, came a shabby, sad-eyed Mexican.

The blond man dismounted in front of the *Senator's* gangplank and, with the Mexican's help, began unlashing the packsaddles. Between them they lowered the heavy sacks to the wharf; then the blond man spoke in a low voice to the Mexican. Those listening could not make out the words, but they could tell that he spoke with a marked French accent.

The Mexican replied, "Si, Señor Pedro," and led the burros away.

Two passengers, standing together at the rail, watched as the blond man summoned the purser and had his cargo carried aboard. "Ore in them sacks, wouldn't you say?" murmured one of them.

The other shrugged.

The first nodded sagely. "Yep, looks

like somebody's made a strike. Yes sir, way he watches them sacks, you'd think they was the King of Siam's treasure. Ain't that right?"

The other man grunted and moved away.

Undiscouraged by this rebuff, the first man cornered the purser and asked the name of the new arrival.

"Pierre Hausenberger," was the answer.

"Hausenberger!" exclaimed the passenger. "Now what kind of a name is that for a Frog? And the Mexican called him Pedro. What you make of that?"

"All I make of it," said the purser testily, "is that he's a French-German Spaniard. Now leave me be. I've got work to do."

The blond man kept to his cabin all the first part of the trip. But the night before they reached San Francisco he came out on deck, and the passenger seized the chance to engage him in conversation.

"Yes, m'sieu," said Hausenberger, "as you say, I am a prospector. I am also a linguist. I am a man of many talents, since you ask, m'sieu. I resolved, when I became a prospector, that I would look for precious metal where other men did not dare, or were too lazy, to go; and thus find what they had missed. And *voila!* I have done so. Yes, as you say, it is gratifying. Listen, m'sieu, since you seem so interested, I will tell you this much. In those sacks of mine in the hold is silver—silver from the richest lode ever discovered. I will say even more—"

But he did not. Instead, he slumped suddenly against the rail and put a hand to his forehead. "I—excuse me, m'sieu," he said weakly. "I feel—unwell."

Deckhands came in answer to the passengers' excited cries, and carried Hausenberger to his cabin. In the morning when they docked, he was much worse, and had to be carried ashore to a boarding house.

And there, without having uttered another word about his mine, Pierre Hausenberger died.

FOR nearly ten years it seemed that the secret of the Lost Frenchman mine was gone forever. Not the slightest trace of a clue existed. Then, in the back room of a San Francisco assayer's office, an assistant discovered some forgotten ore samples in a trash-filled corner. The assayer remembered them vaguely: they had been sent to him years ago, but the sender had never shown up, so he had done nothing about them.

He analyzed the samples out of curiosity. They assayed two thousand, two hundred dollars to the ton! Still, he had no records, no way even of identifying the discoverer of the silver, much less of finding where it came from. Regretfully, he threw the samples away.

But what about the five bags of ore? A man named Johnson, who had heard the tale of the Frenchman and that of the assayer's samples, decided to find out. He searched the docks at San Francisco until he found a shopkeeper named John Bray. Yes, said Bray, he remembered the ore-sacks. A purser of the Pacific Mail line had asked him to take them off the wharf, where they were in the way. He had kept them in his back room for about a year, then thrown them into the bay.

The shop at that time had stood on piles, but the space had later been filled in with earth. Johnson asked and received permission to dig. At last he found the bags, all five of them. The ore, when tested, was identical with that in the assayer's office. If anything, it was even richer than the assayer had supposed.

Johnson promptly embarked on a long search of the steamship line's records for some hint to the silver's origin. He found nothing. Then he boarded each ship as it came in, questioning the pursers. Two said they thought they remembered the man with the ore sacks. One said he had boarded the steamer somewhere in Oregon; the other said Mazatlan, Mexico. Johnson dispatched agents to both place, but they came back empty-handed. Once again the hunt was at a dead-end.

There matters stood until two adventurers named Meacham and Campbell took up the trail. From the start, they fared better than anyone before them. They quickly discovered that Hausenberger had shipped his ore, not from Oregon or Mexico, but from San Diego. They started for there with high hopes, determined to search the whole surrounding country and question everyone they met.

At Mission San Luis Rey, near the site of the present city of Oceanside, they met a Mexican named Ramon Rodriguez. Cer-

(Continued on page 97)

Gun steel flashed under the Red King's glaring lights.

CAST YOUR VOTE IN BULLETS!

CHAPTER ONE

Malozine Takes Over

GUNPLAY was imminent. Malozine sensed it as soon as he set foot inside the Kentucky Sun. Tension stretched across the smoky saloon like a taut network of invisible wires. Patrons huddled against the walls. A goose-necked bartender, his face as white as his apron, clutched his mop rag like a man in a trance.

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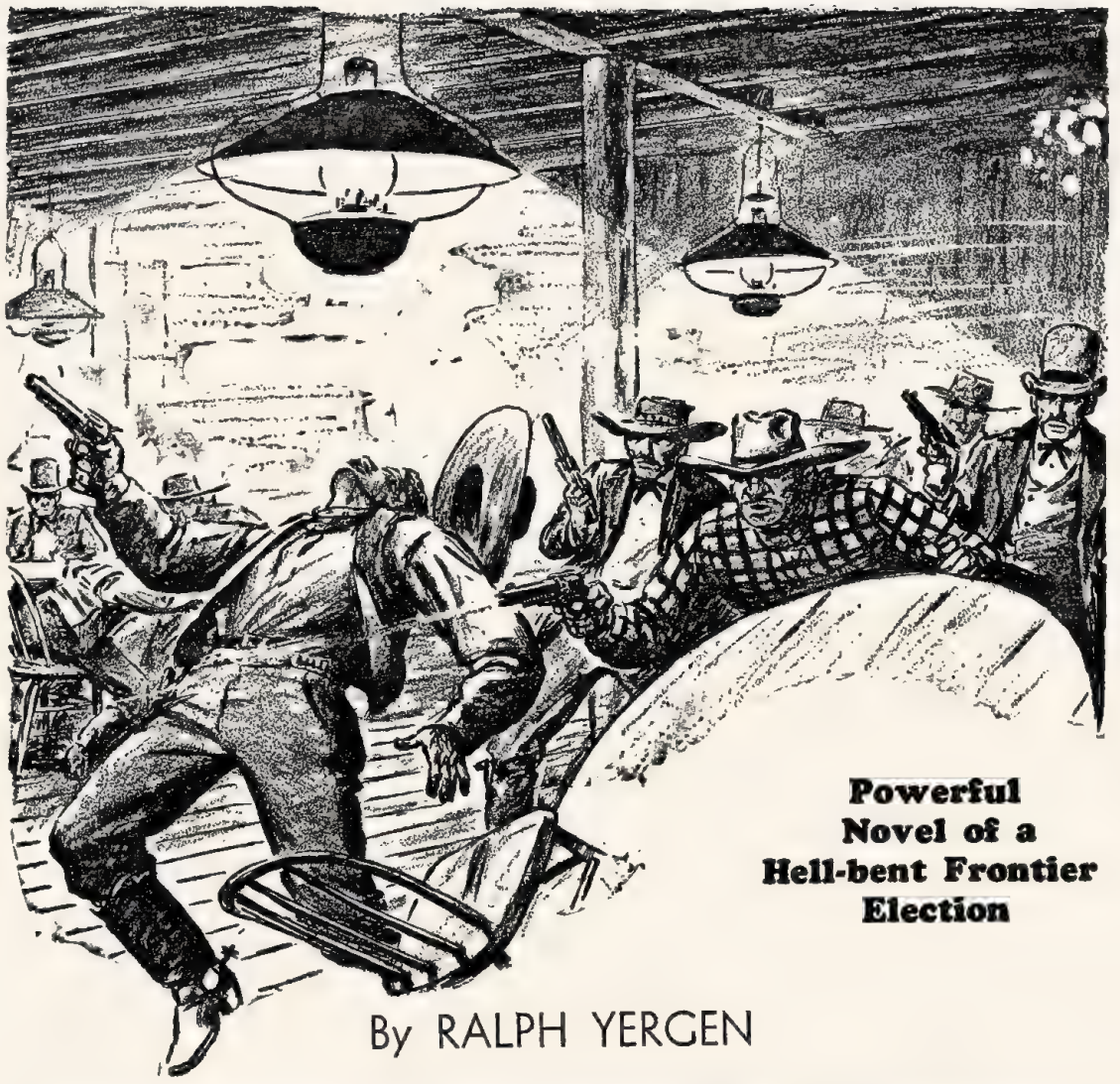

Powerful Novel of a Hell-bent Frontier Election

By RALPH YERGEN

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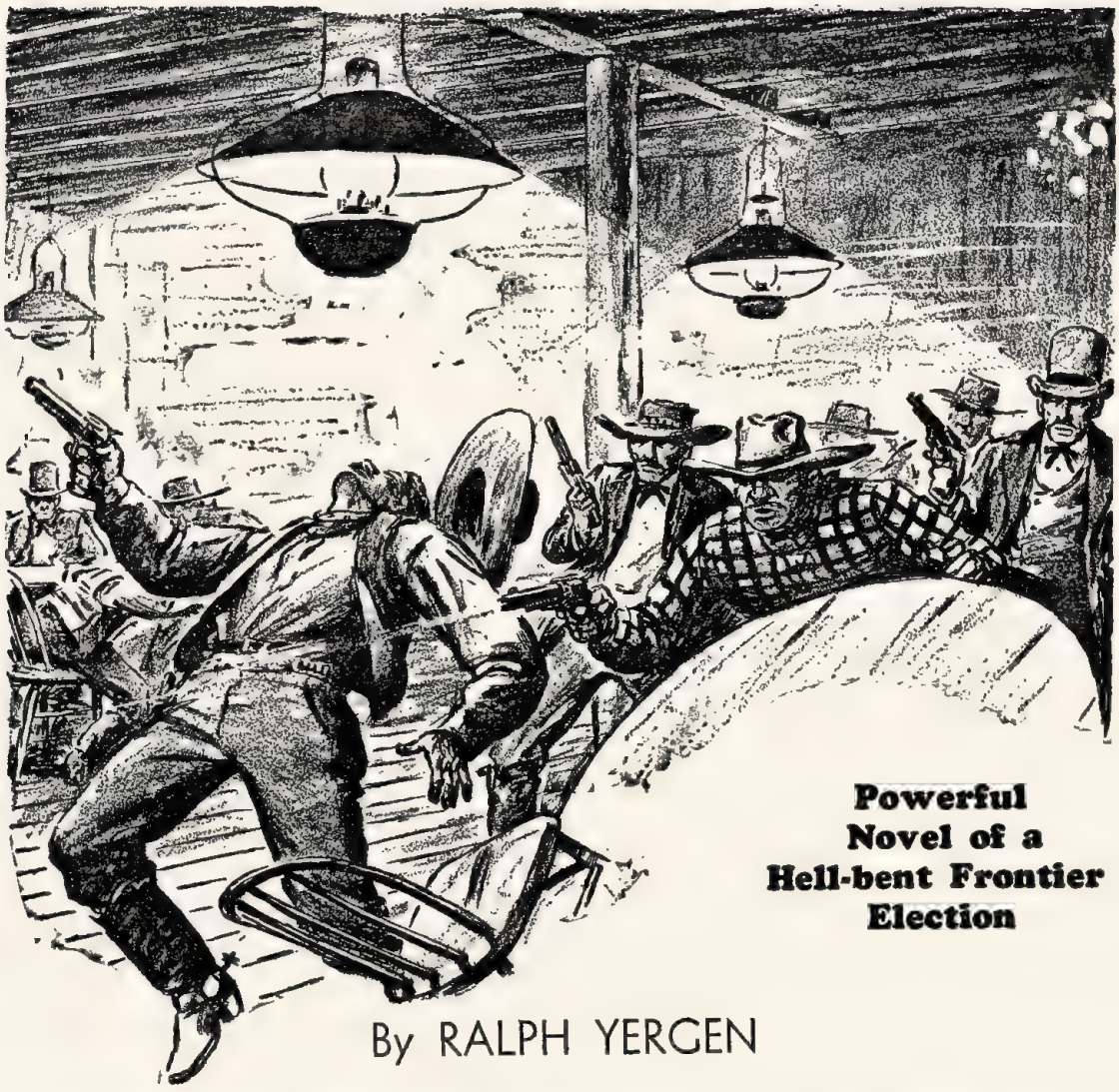
His clothing, splashed brightly by a gold neckerchief at the throat, wore a gray film of dust, as if he had ridden a long distance over the alkali flats. Twin Colt .38's sandwiched his sinewy hips. A flawlessly trimmed mustache, black as a moonless night, formed a striking contrast to his sandy hair and eyebrows.

He stationed himself at the bar in the wide space behind the rat-featured gunman who sat stiffly upright, his wasp-shaped back toward the brass rail.

"Beer," Malozine called to the barkeeper, who hadn't moved a whisker.

His repeated demand brought a bottle skidding down the polished surface. Lifting the bottle to his lips, he swung about to watch the three principals in the barroom drama.

The strong-faced cattleman leaning back in his chair, the stub of a cold cigar clamped



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The strong-faced cattleman leaning back in his chair, the stub of a cold cigar clamped

between his jaws, Malozine had seen before. His name was Frank Howard, and he had once visited Tom Morse, Malozine's boss, on the home spread. Malozine understood he was now a candidate for sheriff. His forthright face revealed no emotion as his wide-spaced brown eyes rested with challenging directness on the two gunmen who occupied separate tables.

Near the rat-faced hombre sat a squat, spidery hardcase. He was hunched over table boards, staring at the candidate for sheriff. He began to talk in a voice like splitting ice.

"Nine years ago you cheated me out of my spread on Little Coldwater, Howard. You made a tramp out of me. Your oily tongue can't waggle you out of the payoff!"

As he lowered the bottle, Malozine saw Frank Howard's face tighten.

"That's a flat lie, Devil Schwab. You never owned a spread on Little Coldwater. Nine years ago you was in storage at a place near Yuma."

"A liar he calls me," Devil Schwab sneered. His voice grew taunting. "Howard, you are a mangy, yellow-gutted son-of-a-sheepherder. You are too rotten yellow to go after your hogleg!"

Devil Schwab's goad succeeded—quicker than the gunwolf had expected. Howard's right hand whipped to his Colt handle and came flaring up in a swift, sweeping arc, a flick of an eyelash faster than Devil Schwab's draw.

But the rat-like man was not asleep. Sharp gasps came from the crowd as his open-ended holster tilted upward, gun and all. That swivel was masked by a fringe of leather hanging from his belt. The gun muzzle was lined on Frank Howard as the candidate's gun cleared cowhide.

THE crowd saw a streak of gray and gold, heard a sodden thwack. And the swivel-holstered hombre was slumping drunkenly in his chair as his revolver throated a wild slug into the opposite wall. Beer foam splattered the room. Broken bottle glass tinkled on the floor.

Frank Howard's weapon thundered a booming encore to the powder blast. Devil Schwab's spidery body lurched. His unfired weapon slipped from his fingers. As he reeled out of his chair, he grabbed at the table for support. Man and furniture piled on the floor in a tangled heap.

The cowpuncher stepped back and dropped the broken bottleneck on the bar.

"Another soldier," he said. "The first one came apart at the seams."

Babbling saloon customers boiled about the two inert gunmen. Frank Howard came striding through the mob, a hand outthrust.

"Quick headwork, pardner," he said. "If you hadn't made a fast pass with that beer bottle, the Midnight sheriff race would be a one-man gallop by now. I'm Frank Howard."

The puncher glanced keenly at the man before him, liking his straightforward style. "The sheriff candidate?"

"Yes. I'm running against Joe Ott."

A wide grin suddenly crinkled the puncher's face to his ears, revealing a clean white gleam beneath the inky mustache.

"I'm your campaign manager. Name of Augustus E. Malozine."

Frank Howard stared, speechless.

Malozine continued, "On leave of absence from the M7 spread over in Tadpole county."

"Tom Morse sent you?" Howard's face brightened. "Come over to my office, Malozine. We've got some high-powered chinning to do. Here comes the acting sheriff. He'll take charge of Devil Schwab's body and Rats Crowley, the killer you iced with the bottle."

A weary, withered man with a star glinting dully from his loose vest entered the batwings and eyed the set-up dourly. He conferred shortly with Frank Howard. Then the rancher turned away, motioning Malozine to accompany him. Together, they emerged into the sunny brightness of Midnight's main thoroughfare.

A BLOCK up the street, Howard turned into a small brick building. They entered a home-like office. Howard occupied a chair behind a paper-heaped desk and waved Malozine into another. He tossed a fat, blue-banded cigar which Malozine snagged with alacrity.

Malozine's eyes were curious as he applied a match to the stogie tip. "How did those unsavory characters manage to bottle you up in that guzzle joint?"

"I'm not proud of my part," Howard admitted bluntly. "This morning I get a note from an old cattleman friend asking

me to pop into the Kentucky Sun at four o'clock for a rag-chawin'. Instead of the cowman, there was the two imported gunslicks. The note, sure enough, was a fake."

Malozine smiled ruefully. "Now you won't believe in notes. And I got one in my pocket from Tom Morse."

"I'll take a chance anytime, pardner, on a gent who jerks me out of a jackpot when the cards are crimped."

Malozine handed him a sealed envelope. Howard ripped it open, read the contents aloud:

"Dear Frank,

I hear you are running for sheriff. Unless Midnight has changed some considerable lately and Blue John Brock has bleached lily white, you will need a campaign manager with the right savvy in his holster. With pleasure I send you such a hombre in Augustus E. Malozine. He has been punching cows until he is punch-drunk. He will enjoy his vacation in Midnight. Send him home when you win the election.

Tom Morse

P. S. Don't be fooled by that polecat fuzz on his mug."

"The low-withered crumb!" Malozine exploded. "This mustache is a priceless symbol of all that I treasure in earthly life. My most prized possession. It took me a year and a sawbuck's worth of fertilizer to nourish it. And crass yahoos like Tom Morse treat it as an object of ridicule!"

"Say!" The candidate's eyes were solemn. "Was Harvard your school?"

Malozine smiled through the blue cloud of cigar smoke. "That sir, is a closed chapter richly veiled in cobwebs. It may be opened on some distant day. Right now we have an election to win."

"Damned if we don't," Howard snapped. He snatched a straight-stemmed pipe off his desk, clamping it savagely between his teeth, then laid it down again and began to talk in a blunt, earnest voice.

"It all started with a bushwhack job on good old Sheriff Mack. Deputy Sam Fisher agreed to take over until an election could be rigged up. That was Fisher you seen at the Kentucky Sun after the shindig. Bein' on the shady side of sixty, Sam wouldn't run for office. So a new man must be elected.

"A loud wool buyer named Joe Ott pitched his sombrero into the ring. Ott is backed by a greedy old miser named Blue John Brock. This Brock is a natural born hog. He owns a big sheep ranch and a lot of other property. But he wants everything he sees. He figures to use Joe Ott in the sheriff's chair to help him milk this range dry as a popcorn breeze. He's got a beautiful scheme worked out."

Malozine flicked the ash off the mellow Havana. "Politics," he observed.

"Of a smelly sort," Howard agreed. "I don't hanker for any public spotlight. Got

YORE tough, Yank, tough enough to have killed a lot of men in yore day. But this day yore through —for yore riding a—

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a blamed good cow ranch to look after. But the valley cattlemen shoved me into the race against Blue John Brock's man. Now I savvy I got to win. Or the iron-gutted pioneers of this range will be swindled out of what it took 'em fifty years to build. I'm in the scrap all the way, but we got powerful opposition. Powerful and dirty."

"This Blue John Brock hombre is behind it all?"

"Hell, no, he ain't. A slippery crook named Ace Ujad owns the Red King saloon and gambling hall. And Ujad is a stout Joe Ott booster. Ujad owns the Kentucky Sun, too. It's a pat cinch his dinero pulled Rats Crowley and Devil Schwab into Midnight. First bare-faced try to tag me for the boneyard. But likely it won't be the last. Things are getting steamy. Election is only a week away. I feel like a man perched on a flagpole makin' faces at a cyclone."

MALOZINE'S eyes were lazy, thoughtful. "Ace Ujad and Blue John Brock. You reckon they're in cahoots?"

Howard shrugged. "No evidence. Majority feeling in the county is against Ujad because people figure his games are crooked. But Ujad supports Joe Ott because he knows Ott won't bother him. Maybe that ties in with Blue John's harness on Ott. Anyhow, we've got Brock and Ujad and the *Midnight Star* all to rastle."

"*Midnight Star?* A newspaper?"

"The town weekly. Brock owns it. He uses it to whip public opinion in Joe Ott's favor. It's Brock's best weapon. Take a gander." Howard flipped an issue face up on the desk.

Malozine stared at the screaming black headlines:

HOWARD SECRETLY IN LEAGUE WITH CROOKED GAMBLERS

CANDIDATE RUMORED PART OWNER OF RED KING

HOWARD SCHEMES TO USURP ENTIRE RANGE

There was much more, all of it accusing Frank Howard of being everything but honest.

Malozine stroked his chin reflectively. "Not exactly flattering. Looks like Brock is up to the old trick of accusing you of every crime of which he himself is guilty. We should have a newspaper of our own."

Howard shrugged. "Only one paper in the county. Everybody reads it. It makes quite an impression. Swings a lot of votes to Joe Ott. Since this last issue, Ott has gained head fast. Unless we get back those votes, he'll win by forty miles."

Malozine got up and stretched lazily. "Tom Morse was right. You need a campaign manager, Howard. From now on, we begin to roar. I'll have myself a heart-to-heart pow-wow with the editor of the *Midnight Star*. Might even talk him into a reporter job. Journalistic ability runs in the family. My uncle is a printer in Kansas."

The candidate looked at him sharply. "Keep your smoker oiled, Malozine. Don't forget that Brock, not the editor, bosses the *Star*. And steer clear of the Red King, damn it. Ace Ujad has four or five bullet-brained gun-devils on his payroll. And Ace himself is the trickiest Colt-juggler ever seen in Midnight."

The cowpuncher grinned. "Don't worry about Augustus E. Just go out and buy yourself a bottle of badge polish, Howard. Leave the rest to Malozine."

CHAPTER TWO

Beer Is a Man's Drink

WHEN Augustus E. Malozine emerged from Frank Howard's office, Midnight was settling down to that transitional hour between the day's toil and the night's boisterous recreation. The red sun was balanced like a glowing ball on the flat plain to the west. Its light tinted the town walls like a smoky spray of flame. The bleat of sheep came from the loading pens along the tracks, and somewhere on the prairie a cow bawled, the sound plaintive and lonely.

In such a moment it was difficult to believe that men like Ace Ujad and Blue John Brock were abroad in the land, tainting it with their greed and treachery.

A gnawing emptiness in the pit of his stomach lassoed Malozine's thoughts from the abstract. He turned in at the nearest restaurant and proceeded to stow away the biggest meal on the menu.

When he left the restaurant, picking his teeth in well-fed content, a Joe Ott-for-

sheriff rally was in progress on the vacant lot across the street. People jammed the space, most of them townsmen, a few sheephands. From a warped platform, a paunchy, red-faced man with overhanging eyebrows and a voice like a longhorn bull was spouting four-bit phrases at his audience. Malozine judged him to be Joe Ott himself.

Behind the speaker sat a lugubrious man in a dark blue suit. He was gaunt and stooped, with abnormally long limbs and a sharp, narrow beak. Gloomy eyes, hollowed deep under the bony forehead, darkened a face upon which the lines of guile and greed were firmly intrenched. Blue John Brock in person, thought Malozine.

He listened to the speaker's ranting. The usual brand of campaign promises. Clean-up of town riff-raff and crooked gambling. Lower taxes. Justice for all.

Bored, Malozine was moving on when Joe Ott abruptly brought his harangue to a close with a stirring plea for the defeat of the cattle tyrant, Frank Howard. As Ott stepped down to handshake the applauding listeners, Blue John Brock moved off the platform and came toward the street.

Acting on abrupt impulse, Malozine intercepted the gaunt sheepman, whom he discovered to be a head taller than himself despite the stooped posture.

"I take it you're Brock, manager for Joe Ott," Malozine said, thrusting out a hand.

Blue John Brock stared. "Yes," he said guardedly.

"I'm Augustus E. Malozine, new manager for Frank Howard. In the interest of friendly rivalry, I make myself known. Of course we want to keep this contest free from personal friction."

The puzzlement on Brock's face intensified. He accepted Malozine's hand as if he were afraid it contained a toy snake.

"Yes, yes, of course," he said silkily. "Nothing personal in our political competition."

"Just what I thought. It's a rare pleasure to have such clean-minded and above-suspicion opponents. Shall we say, let the best man win on his own merits?"

"Certainly," Blue John Brock agreed, a cunning gleam in his eyes. "I would consider no other course. It is a pleasure to have met you, Mr. Malozine. Let us hope your excellent health continues."

"I'm sure it will," Malozine said solemnly. "And let the same well-wishing apply to you, also, and to your man Ott. Let us hope none of this sudden illness strikes us as befell the late Devil Schwab."

"Schwab?" Brock repeated. "Ah, yes, I believe I did hear of his—er—misfortune. In the Kentucky Sun, wasn't it? Well, I must be on my way. Important business, you know. Perhaps we will meet again before election day—if you see fit to remain in town."

Malozine said, "I expect to remain in town indefinitely even though some others may take up permanent residence in a suburb noted for its fine marble."

As he turned down the street, Blue John Brock stared after him, a peculiar expression on his buzzard-like face.

TWO blocks along the dusk-filled street, Malozine idled to a halt. Portal lamps from the building beside him laid a soft sheen on the street dust. The melodic tinkle of a piano rippled through the cooling air. A motley stream of men flowed through a huge swinging door between the lamps.

Malozine removed his Stetson and industriously curried his sandy thatch. "How odd," he murmured, "that I should find myself in front of the Red King."

Through the big gambling hall's lure, he recalled Frank Howard's words of warning. Obviously, Howard did not understand that a campaign manager's job included an appraisal of the opponent's support. Ace Ujad was an Ott supporter. Therefore an appraisal of Ujad and his business would be part of Malozine's job. Self-convinced, he joined the river of humanity and allowed himself to be swept within the tentacles of the swinging door.

The Red King was a gambling hall which would have been impressive in a town a dozen times the size of Midnight. Colorfully lighted, suffused by the music of the muted piano, it possessed a distinct big city atmosphere. Its patrons, however, were not big city. They represented every type known to western rangeland. Crap tables, faro, draw and stud poker, blackjack and chuck-a-luck flourished. Even a roulette wheel sang and clicked its way to a harvest of hard-earned sheephand dollars.

The long, polished bar was jammed with

thirsty customers. Malozine crowded in beside a burly, black-whiskered man with a heavy sixgun hung low on his right thigh.

"Beer," he said to a bald, keen-eyed barkeeper, as he spun a coin onto the bar.

"Sure thing," the barkeep replied cordially. We drew a mug of foamy suds from the tap.

Although Malozine had lived much of his life in a country where raw whiskey was the standard drink, he had never learned to like the fiery flavor. The big, burly man beside him rolled straight rye into a glass until the liquid spilled over the sides. Cupping the glass with thumb and forefinger, he lifted it to his beard and slopped down the contents noisily. He sneered as Malozine lifted the mug of beer.

"Powerful stout for a runt like you," he rumbled insultingly.

Malozine set down the mug gently, its creamy top untouched. A steely flicker lighted the depths of his gray eyes. "Speakin' to me?" he said softly.

The big ruffian's yellow teeth showed through his beard. "You better trade that off for a bottle of sody pop, sonny. Be more your calibre."

Impulse powered a major part of Malozine's actions. He did not like either the man's looks or his lingo. As a consequence, his right fist smashed into the man's belly muscles, resounding like a bass drum.

A bellow of rage disgorged from the man's thick throat. He flung up huge arms as a circle cleared magically around them. A voice yelled from the crowd. "Paste him, Boomer!"

Malozine bored in like a wasp, peppering away with both hands, trying to pierce Boomer's guard. He caught a short jarring blow on the side of the head. Sparks showered his brain. He side-stepped, bounced in fast with an overhand right to the whiskers.

The big fellow was cursing like a drunken muleskinner. He lunged away from the bar, swinging a rock-crusher fist that Malozine ducked. Blows whistled past him. Malozine slipped and side-stepped, his chin buried in the hollow of his hunched shoulder. He shot a straight right into the pit of the Boomer's stomach, and heard the breath whoosh out of him. But the blow failed to sap that grizzly bear strength.

Malozine kept dodging, but he couldn't dodge all of those slashing fists. He stopped one cheekbone, another with his forehead. Crushing shock wedged into his brain. The room began to revolve in a dizzy whirl. He was trying to focus his eyes on that bearded chin when his head was snapped back by an uppercut square to the jawbone.

Blue-white flame exploded in his brain. His body went limp and rubbery. Jaws of darkness closed over him, soundlessly and without pain. . . .

PINPOINTS of light were glittering down at Malozine when his senses returned. He blinked and stirred his lax body. Then he saw that the lights were bright stars in the sky above, and that he was sprawling in the street dust in front of the Red King. He climbed to his knees and shook the wooziness from his brain.

A couple of overloaded sheepherders were snoring in the gutter a few yards away. People passing along the walk disdained to glance at him.

A rueful smile on his lips, Malozine got to his feet and batted dust from his clothing. He aired his .38 and up-ended the holster. Replacing the revolver, he pushed through the Red King's door again.

Although he had become embroiled in dozens of fist fights, most of them with men much heavier than himself, he did not remember ever winning one. Thus his calloused pride was not scarred, and except for bruises he was unhurt.

The black-whiskered man was still at the bar drinking whiskey. But Malozine's beer was gone. Malozine muscled in at his old notch.

"Loser buys, Boomer," he said, without malice. "What'll you have? Rye?"

The big man spun, stared with a mixture of contempt and amazement.

Malozine held up a finger to the bald barkeeper. "One rye. One beer."

The barkeeper flashed a wide, friendly smile. "Comin' up, sport."

Boomer snorted, quickly poured and tossed off his drink. Malozine reached for the mug of beer which the barkeep planted on the smooth oak. Before he could touch it, Boomer's hairy hand shot out and snatched the glass. The contents struck Malozine squarely in the face.

Sputtering, Malozine backed away from

the bar. Boomer's coarse guffaws thundered in his ears. Deliberately, Malozine wiped the suds out of his eyes with his kerchief. Laughter was braying on all sides. It seemed everybody was laughing but the barkeeper, whose face was dark as he muttered, "You always run your horseplay into the ground, Boomer. Some day you'll get your ears pinned back."

Boomer's huge belly was shaking with guffaws. He didn't notice the rising temper in Malozine's eyes.

The campaign manager finished drying his fingers. "All right, Boomer. You can handle your fists. You can handle liquor. Let's see how you can handle that hogleg on your hip."

An abrupt hush dropped over the room. Boomer sobered instantly. His face twisted into a scowl. His eyes grew ugly, his voice taunting. "Ain't had enough, huh? Mebby you want a slug between the peepers?"

Malozine said quietly, "If you're yellow, there's the door."

Boomer roared a curse. His brawny paw slapped his gun butt with a force that could be heard in the far corners of the room. The weapon was almost clear of leather when the booming thunder of Malozine's right hand .38 split the room's silence wide.

Smoke swirled across the space between the two men. Through it, Malozine saw Boomer's gun arm flop at his side, the unfired pistol slipping to the floor. Smashed near the shoulder, the burly ruffian's arm dangled uncontrollably. With a hoarse howl of pain, he lowered his head, plunged to the door and vanished into the night.

Malozine replaced the spent cartridge with a fresh load. He cased the .38 and walked calmly back to the bar where he ordered another beer from the widely grinning barkeeper.

"If there's no further objections, I'll guzzle this one," he remarked.

THE hum of the gaming tables returned to normal. Malozine was finishing his drink unmolested when a flashy-dressed man detached from the tight group around the roulette wheel and came toward the bar.

He possessed the thin, flinty features of a gambler. Yet there was something intriguing about him that set him apart from the common run of tinhorns. Perhaps it was his snapping black eyes. Or the sensitive flare of his nostrils above the thin, razor-edge lips.

He halted beside Malozine, ordered a double Scotch and said in a neutral voice, "You have certain qualities which I admire, my friend. May I make myself known? Ace Ujad, owner of the Red King."

Malozine studied the man further. He was as unreadable as a slab of polished marble. Yet beneath the handsome coldness of his features, Malozine knew there burned a fanatical flame so intense that it threatened to consume the man's mentality. But until that occurred, Ace Ujad was as dangerous as any reptile on the range and as quick witted as a slick city lawyer.

"Glad to meet the owner of such a thriving business, Ujad," Malozine said. "I'm—"

"Yes, I know," the gambler said quickly. "I make it my business to know everyone who steps into the Red King. Pays dividends, sometimes. Come on in the office. I'd like to have a word with you in private, Malozine. I think you'll be interested."

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign
Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Malozine hesitated, then followed the man around the end of the bar to a door partly obscured by hanging draperies. His fingers idled near his sixgun handles as he strode through the doorway behind Ujad's long black coat tails.

The office room was spacious and richly furnished. It was lighted exotically by a shaded lamp and smelled faintly of incense. No one else was in evidence, yet Malozine had an uneasy feeling that hidden eyes were watching.

They occupied easy chairs. Ace Ujad lighted a long, Turkish cigarette. Limned in the queer, unreal light he resembled a pagan idol.

"What wages are you drawing, Malozine?" he asked directly.

Malozine blinked. Technically, he was still employed on the M7 ranch. He trusted Tom Morse would continue his salary while he was enjoying this so-called vacation.

"Forty a month," he said.

Ujad sniffed. "About what you could expect of a cheap skate cattleman boss. How'd you like to earn some real dough?"

"If it was a question of earning it, I'd be doubtful. Reckon I was just born lazy, Ujad."

"The work's not hard—for you," Ujad said significantly. "There will be days when you won't have a damned thing to do."

"The other days?"

"Certain parties are foolish enough to believe they can put me out of business, Malozine. That's why I must keep a capable maintenance crew. Now and then it's necessary to remove an obstructionist from the premises. You proved your capabilities by ruining big Boomer tonight. He has been working for me. But just as I knew he would, he overplayed his crude sense of humor once too often. Now he's of no further value to me. His job is yours, at an increase in pay. Say fifty dollars a week. A bonus on special assignments. Of course you would have to sever connections with Howard."

Malozine stroked his chin reflectively. "Your offer is interesting, Ujad. I'd like a couple of days to think it over."

"Certainly. And in the meantime—" Ace Ujad drew a long puff on his cigarette and let the smoke dribble out of his nostrils "—in the meantime you might be wise to restrict your activities to just thinking and nothing else!"

Somehow, as Malozine left that room, he felt as if he were departing from a camouflaged chamber of death.

CHAPTER THREE

Freedom Of The Press

ON Midnight's street again with the damp coolness of night filling his lungs, Malozine turned over in his mind what he had seen and heard. Maybe, if he played the cards exactly right, he could worm a few bits of information out of Ace Ujad before he gave him the decision long since formed in his mind. Stalling Ace Ujad was like bluffing a box of dynamite with a burning fuse attached, however, and Malozine decided to continue his original plan of trying to shake a fair deal out of the *Midnight Star* editor.

A light shining in the old wooden newspaper building at the opposite end of town indicated someone was working late. Malozine entered boldly through the unlocked door. He saw a stocky, gray-haired man humped over a copy-strewn desk. He was the sole occupant of the printing room. The man lifted his weary, deep-lined face.

Malozine's eyes widened in an unbelieving stare. That face had aged much since he had last seen it. But there could be no mistaking the square features, the steady gray eyes.

"Uncle Hiram!" he blurted. "I thought you were in Kansas."

Hiram Potts came out of his chair as if propelled by a spring. "Augustus, my nephew! What brings you here, boy?"

As their hands met, Malozine remembered his mission. "I might ask the same question, Uncle Hiram."

Pride swelled Hiram Potts' chest. "I am an editor now as well as a printer. Editor of the *Midnight Star.*"

Under Malozine's gaze, Hiram Potts deflated visibly. After an awkward silence, Malozine said accusingly, "I didn't think it of you, Uncle Hiram. I suppose you know what the best people are saying about your journal."

A beaten look dropped over the editor's face. "Yes, I've heard," he muttered. "Politics makes ill feelings and bad enemies."

Malozine pressed brutally on. He picked up a copy of the *Star,* thrust it before his uncle's bloodshot eyes. "Just look at those

headlines. Ain't you ashamed? It couldn't be that you don't know any better. I hate to say this, Uncle Hiram. But in my opinion you are a disgrace to the profession and to the peerless name of Potts."

Hiram slumped in his chair and buried his chin in his ink-smudged hands. He looked so utterly downcast that Malozine tried to soften his words with an apology. But the editor waved him to silence.

"You are completely right, Augustus. I have known it for many days. But I have not had the courage to admit it even to myself. It all started back in Kansas. Like many a printer, I developed a burning desire to become an editor. A man named John Brock advertised in a publisher's trade journal for a small town editor. I answered it. I grabbed the job eagerly. When I first started here in Midnight, everything went smoothly—without interference. Then this election thing came up.

"Brock got to coming around before each issue with editorials for me to print. I didn't like the idea. But I was working for Brock and I wanted to stay on as editor. So I ran the editorials. Then he started bringing in news stories for me to play on the first page. Mud-slinging politics, as anybody could see. But again Brock was the boss. He intimated he could find another editor if I raised too many objections.

"At my age, I didn't expect to get a chance with another paper. Like a weak-spined jellyfish, I buckled in and played up his stories with the big heads he wanted. I figured the election would soon be over, and the paper's policies again returned to my hands. Yes, nephew, as an editor I am a miserable failure. It took someone like you to drive that fact through all the flimsy alibis I had cooked up in my mind."

ABSORBED in his thoughts, Malozine gazed unseeing at the floor as he automatically shaped a cigarette and lighted it. Here was an apt illustration of how a cunning hombre like Blue John Brock could seize upon a man's wholesome desires and warp them into an ironic weapon to destroy that man's character until he became a spineless satellite. Perhaps Joe Ott fundamentally was not a bad man. But in the shrewd grip of Blue John Brock, he would soon be like pliable clay.

Malozine lifted his gaze. "Uncle Hiram, you have made a start on the come-back trail by admitting your editorial sins. It is not too late to come back all the way."

The editor's voice was despairing. "How can I, Augustus? With the make-up of the next issue, Brock will be at my elbow with a fistful of copy. Either I print it, or he hires someone who will."

His face grew bleak and dismal. "I didn't tell you all, Augustus. Brock does not come down alone. He brings with him the gun-hung rascals who work on his sheep ranch. They loaf about the printshop, drinking and carousing, while I work. They do not leave until papers are being delivered."

Malozine stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Have you ever thought of printing a special edition, Uncle Hiram?"

Hiram Potts stared at his nephew. Understanding stole over his face. His eyes brightened. "Say! It might work. Brock usually stays away during the lull between issues. Maybe we could have the paper in the mail before he found out!"

"No maybe," Malozine said firmly. "We get busy now—tonight. All we have to change is the editorials and page one. I can manufacture some headlines which will tell the truth and still be strong enough to swat the readers right in the eye."

Hiram Potts punished the desk with his clenched fist. "Get busy!" he snapped. "Get busy, Augustus. For this one special issue, the *Midnight Star* is going to be the most fearless paper in all the West. And Hiram Potts is going to be its editor. To hell with the consequences! To hell with Blue John Brock!"

A crusader's light in his eyes, Hiram Potts snatched up a black, stubby pencil and started feverishly to write.

LATE the following afternoon, with the special edition of the *Midnight Star* in the hands of delivery boys and a bulging-eyed postmaster, Malozine threw himself wearily into a chair. Without food or sleep, he had labored many hours on the lever of the man-killing hand press while his uncle handled the sheets and ink with a zeal that harbored no thoughts of respite.

Malozine turned over a copy and again studied the headlines which he could repeat with his eyes closed. Covering half the front page, the black type glared at him ferociously.

HOWARD CLEARED OF ALL CHARGES! JOE OTT BACKED BY BROCK, UJAD

WEALTHY RANCHER PLANS TO BLANKET ENTIRE RANGE WITH SHEEP AND GUNMEN

CATTLEMAN CANDIDATE ESCAPES HIRED KILLERS' SALOON GUNTRAP

There followed, under the byline of Hiram Potts, a story unfolding the scheming methods of Blue John Brock in striving to elect the candidate of his choice. Ace Ujad came in for a heavy play, featured by his attempt to lure Howard's campaign manager by offering gunman wages. It was quite a complete story in all, Malozine thought, and one which would jar the readers into thinking several times before voting for Joe Ott.

Boxed at the page bottom in boldface type, a Potts-written editorial fairly scorched the paper with its scathing denunciation of Blue John Brock and his news-falsifying methods formerly practiced in the *Star*. It announced that the *Star* was hereby throwing off the shackles of corrupt politics and beginning a crusade for freedom of the press. It ended with a thorough endorsement of Frank Howard for sheriff.

Malozine grinned as he reread the sizzling lines. Blue John Brock was going to turn bright green when he perused the latest edition of his newspaper. As for Ace Ujad, that high-strung gambler was likely to explode to fragments.

Hiram Potts appeared from the washroom, fresh shaven, his silvery hair neatly combed. He looked twenty years younger. He said solemnly, "Augustus, for the first time in my editorial career, I feel free. I feel that I have honestly performed my duty to the public."

Malozine nodded agreement. "I am proud to be your nephew, Uncle Hiram. I apologize for what I said last night. You rank with Horace Greeley. And now that you have achieved greatness, you had better take my blue roan. He is in the stable behind Frank Howard's office. He is the fastest horse Midnight has ever seen. And do not stop riding until you are back in Kansas."

Hiram Potts looked insulted. He assumed every inch of his masterful five feet, eight. "Now! Now! In my day of editorial triumph, you expect me to slink away like a whipped cur? Augustus, I resent that. I will stand by my creed. I am editor of the *Star* until formally discharged. I have my duty to perform. I will perform it until I topple in the dust from hoodlum bullets. I shall die happy in the knowledge that like many another intrepid editor, I am becoming a martyr to a priceless cause, the freedom of the American press."

"Spoken like a true Potts," said Malozine. "Whatever others may think of you, Uncle Hiram, in my mind you are a great editor and a very brave man."

Leaving Hiram Potts to his new but hazardous freedom, Malozine returned to Frank Howard's office. The candidate was gone, but the door was unlocked. He stretched out on the wooden floor and went to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Lead Makes a Cold Stiff

WHEN Malozine opened his eyes, the full blaze of morning sun was pouring into the room through the front windows. He sat up and yawned widely. Through a film of lingering sleep, he saw Frank Howard grinning at him above a fresh copy of the *Midnight Star*.

"Lizard lazy," Malozine grunted, apologetically. He carefully folded the blanket which someone had thrown over him during the night; then reached for the makings. Howard thrust a blue-banded cigar into his face, and he hastily replaced the tobacco sack.

"Reconsidering our local sheet," he asked, as he lighted up in solemn satisfaction.

"It's ace-high," chuckled Howard. "It's blue ribbon stuff. Hit the whole county like an earthquake. How you managed it is mystery number one."

Malozine waved a deprecating hand. "Family influence. That's all. The editor turned out to be my uncle from Kansas."

"God bless your uncle from Kansas," Howard said fervently. "Ott had the edge on me. It looked hopeless. But now that people are reading the truth for a change, we'll pick up fast. Already it's a horse race again."

"You mean a horse and jackass race,"

Malozine said. "With yourself as the horse, of course."

The cattleman looked keenly at his manager. "You're a queer one, Malozine. Don't know another gent just like you. Some day I'm going to make you cough up your past history—if you live long enough."

"There seems to be grave doubts afloat in the land about my living to a ripe old age. Can't imagine why. I never felt more skookum in my life."

"Neither did I," Howard reminded, "when I sat down in the Kentucky Sun day before yesterday. Things happen suddenlike in this town of Midnight. Just to make sure I keep a valuable campaign manager with a whole hide for another twenty-four hours, I'm not going to let you out of my sight all day. And we'll walk past no dark alleys tonight. And we'll stay a long ways from the Red King."

Malozine tugged at his mustache. "Hmm. Yes. The Red King. Interesting place."

"I said stay out of it!" Howard snapped. "Ace Ujad and Blue John Brock are both boiling mad. They won't take this sitting down. Election is still five days away."

"Just the same, the Red King intrigues me," Malozine persisted, lazily inspecting his blue spiral of fragrant smoke. "I must have human weaknesses."

Frank Howard shook his head hopelessly. "You got something. But I ain't sure it's human."

MALOZINE spent the day with Frank Howard making contacts with influential ranchers and townsmen. Response to the *Star's* crusade was gratifying. Astute observers now foresaw a closely contested election, with Frank Howard's chances as good as Joe Ott's.

The fever of the campaign began to pulse through Malozine's blood in a new and fascinating way. It was like a horse race or a bucking contest, except that the fate of the range was included in the sweepstakes.

Feeling ran sharp through the town. Both factions were anticipating victory. Frank Howard pointed out two of Ace Ujad's gunhawks across the street, swart, apelike men named Vince Vogrich and Bargrease Smith. They stared, but made no definite hostile move.

Howard remarked, "They're not jumping us. It means Ace Ujad has got something clever up his sleeve. Or else trouble will break first from Blue John Brock."

The next morning they had an early visit from Sam Fisher. The lawman looked old and tired. He slumped into a chair, a defeated look in his eyes.

"Nothing but troubles," he moaned. "I just come from the jug. Found the cell lock smashed and Rats Crowley gone. Figgered I'd better warn you fellers first off."

Frank Howard looked chagrined. "Lock smashed! It means he was sprung from the outside. This smells like Ace Ujad."

Sam Fisher nodded gloomily. "I reckon. But we can't touch Ujad without evidence. If you ketch sight of Crowley, cut him down."

"We will," Howard promised grimly.

Malozine finally stirred from his sleepy silence. "Quit worrying, you two. Rats Crowley won't go far."

"That's what we're afraid of," Howard said.

The lawman rose with a dismal sigh. "I wish the next four days were over. I'll shore be plumb glad when you or some other durn fool goes to totin' this here star."

"Complimentary cuss," Malozine observed, as the lawman dragged his heels out of the building.

THE dusk of an uneventful day was drawing its soft blue curtain over Midnight when Malozine left Frank Howard conversing with some cattlemen friends. Unnoticed by the candidate, he wandered down the darkening street toward the *Star* office. An impulse to find out how Brock's reaction had affected Hiram Potts governed his steps.

He had seen his uncle about town during the day, apparently carrying on his duties in a normal manner. Yet he had an uneasy feeling that disaster was in store for Hiram Potts if he persisted in remaining in Midnight. Perhaps in the calmer atmosphere of the past two days, his uncle's stubborn pride had retreated before the instincts of self-preservation. Malozine was ready to renew the offer of his fast horse.

He was still thinking about his uncle's plight when a sly movement in building shadows across the street brought him to an abrupt halt. His fingers curled about the

.38 handle against his right thigh. For a brief instant, he stared at a dark, indistinct shape which might be a man crouching.

The faint click of a hammer cocking warned him. He hurled himself sideways into a darkened doorway.

A brilliant orange flash fanged the dusk. The bullet smashed the doorglass above Malozine. Fragments showered him. He ripped his .38 free and lined it on the shadowed space across the street, waiting.

Alarmed voices chorused a medley of profane questions. Saloon doors banged open. Men gawked up and down the street in wonder.

Malozine didn't move. Not until he spotted a bat-like figure darting through the dust, vanishing around the back corner of an opposite building. He triggered a quick shot. The echoes rolled along the street like thunder.

"Missed," he growled. Leaping to the sidewalk, he sprinted across the thoroughfare while men watched, open-mouthed.

He veered into the narrow slot between the next two buildings, hoping to intercept the bushwhacker's flight. His gun ready for an instant shot, he raced out of the murky shadow into the broader light of a vacant space cluttered by weeds and assorted junk.

A shape flitted from the shadow of a woodpile toward the back porch of a side street dwelling.

"Hold it!" Malozine yelled.

A streak of powderflame gashed the gloom. The slug hissed past Malozine's ear. He ducked low, triggered at the running figure. The man was trying to reach that vine-covered porch.

Malozine went to one knee, resting his elbow and shooting with machine-like precision. He saw the man stumble, fall to his knees.

Jabbing red needles perforated the night as the gun barked back at him. Slugs whined and zizzed past him, sprayed dirt in his face, plucked at his clothing. A bitter slash of fire knifed the flesh of his thigh.

Calmly squinting down the gunsights, Malozine hammered a shot that he judged went a few inches high. He drew a finer bead and let drive again.

The night grew abruptly dark. Dying echoes dwindled away on the prairie. A hubbub of excitement sprang up.

Malozine limped toward the motionless body sprawled in the weeds. He was not in much doubt about the bushwhacker's identity. By the pale afterglow, he confirmed his suspicion. The dead man was Rats Crowley.

"He should have stood in jail," Malozine muttered.

Frank Howard and his cattleman pals were among the vanguard to reach the scene. Howard's face was white and tense. Relief made his voice sound more flat than accusing when he saw that it was Crowley and not Malozine sprawled lifelessly on the ground.

"You sneaked away from me, hash your ornery hide, Malozine. And right away you got into trouble, just like I had always predicted."

Malozine gazed about in wonder, secretly hoping they wouldn't notice the bullet gash in his thigh. "What trouble?"

Howard looked exasperated. He hooked Malozine's arm. "Come on, bud, we're going straight to a doctor. You wouldn't admit you were hit if you had a bullet hole big enough to throw a spittoon through."

Malozine grinned as he docilely permitted Howard to lead him streetward. "Are you running for sheriff or nursemaid? Up in Tadpole County, we plug up a nick like this with a stogie stub and go on about our business."

"Okay, wise hombre. I get the drift." Frank Howard handed over a blue-banded cigar. "But we go to the sawbones just the same."

Malozine's grin broadened as he rammed the tasty Havana under his mustache and reached for a match.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hangnoose Bait

IT was late the following night when Malozine got another chance to evade Frank Howard's vigilance. Worn by the feverish activity of his campaign, Howard went to sleep in his office chair. Malozine promptly cat-footed out of the building and eyed the town's buzzing recreative centers with the vicarious thrill of a schoolboy playing hookey. The lights of the Red King formed a cogent magnet. He walked toward them, remindful of invisible menace in the

shadows. Yet the menace was never uppermost in his mind.

As he neared the Red King, Frank Howard's warning resounded in his ears. For several minutes, Howard's words battled the lure of the big gambling hall with its motley throngs, its music and fascinating games. The house gunmen would be inside, possibly waiting only for his appearance to start cracking caps. A zestful thrill of danger rippled down his spine. He was in an excellent mood for a ruckus.

He recalled that he had not yet replied to Ace Ujad's proposition. "I promised," he argued with himself. "And Augustus E. Malozine always keeps his word."

He advanced toward the portals. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," he quoted, under his breath. And added. "Malozine, you certainly are no angel."

He blithely allowed himself to be swallowed up by the swinging door. Disgorged into a group of jabbering sheepherders, he plowed to the bar and ordered a beer. Recognition in his keen blue yes, the bald man in the white apron unfurled a friendly grin.

"Ace wants to see you," he murmured, as he proffered a foam-crested mug.

As Malozine sipped the cold liquid, he noticed Vince Vogrich and Bargrease Smith within the crowd's environs. And then Ace Ujad himself emerged from his office and combed the room with his volcanic eyes.

Malozine finished his beer and strode toward the gambling czar. He felt the stab of that black gaze like a hot torch. Ace Ujad's nostrils flared a bit wider, but his voice was cordial and velvet smooth.

"I was hoping you would call, Mr. Malozine."

"A Malozine never forgets, Mr. Ujad."

The gambler smiled thinly. "I'd say you have already given a definite answer to my offer. But there's nothing like formality."

Malozine's eyes searched the gambler's inscrutable features. He gathered that Ujad was fully aware of the role he had played in the *Star's* special edition.. Yet the man revealed no malice as he continued in that velvet voice.

"If you will kindly step into my office, Mr. Malozine, I have a special proposition which I'm sure will interest you."

Malozine felt strong chains of caution tighten within him. Here among the crowd he felt reasonably safe. But behind that partition. . . .

Ujad added. "It's a new proposition I'm sure you won't see fit to reject."

Malozine stroked his chin. "There seem to be several spare tables here among the lilting music and joyous voices and flowing rye."

"I'd much prefer privacy. The topic is of extreme importance. Can it be that you do not trust me, my friend?"

"Oh, certainly not! How could you think such things, my dear Mr. Ujad?"

The gambler stepped back, indicated the office door. "Then let us confer. No harm shall befall you, Mr. Malozine. My word of honor."

To Malozine, the gambler's word of honor was worth almost as much as a bushel of desert air. Yet he was in a reckless mood and was resigned to the fact that it would soon become necessary to start house cleaning here at the Red King regardless.

ACE UJAD went through the doorway first. Malozine walked warily, fingers near his holstered sixguns. In contrast to the brightly lighted barroom, the luxurious office seemed vague and dusky. Peering past Ujad's shoulder, Malozine spotted men within the room's shadows, and his nerve ends tingled.

Two house gunmen, a carrot-faced hardcase and a huge, bald hombre who looked like a scraped porker attired in range clothing, were lounging in the big club chairs. Beyond them loomed the vulturine figure of Blue John Brock. Over the long, sharp beak, the sheepman's eyes glittered coldly at Malozine.

Chill barbs of danger pressed into Malozine's spine. Four armed enemies lurked within this room. He felt as if he were trapped within the walls of a rattlesnake pit.

"I thought you said privacy," he reminded Ujad.

"Practically, my friend. You know these gentlemen? Mr. Sap Donavan and Mr. Hognose Wilster are my insurance agents. Mr. Brock is my associate in this special matter."

The sheepman nodded, his dour face somehow expressing both hatred and miserly satisfaction. "We meet again." He turned to the two gunmen. "Now our exhibit."

Malozine remained standing while Ace Ujad walked to the desk and lighted a Turkish cigarette. The cocky, flame-complexioned Sap Donavan strode to a closet door, jerked it open. Huge Hognose Wilster waddled up, reached into the dark interior and hauled out a compact bundle in human clothing.

An electric shock tingled the roots of Malozine's hair. He stared through narrowed lids. Helpless in a snarl of knotted ropes, Hiram Potts was dragged into the room and dumped on the lush carpet.

Even though his face and head were splotched by ugly cuts and bruises, the *Star* editor was conscious. His gaze fixed on Malozine, but a tight gag prevented him from speaking.

Brock's voice cut into Malozine's thoughts like a twisting blade. "Your uncle is quite alive, Malozine. I trust you will want him kept that way. Very simply arranged if you are reasonable."

Malozine's lips firmed to a silent, arrow-straight line. Ujad's voice remained an oily purr, yet it rasped harshly in Malozine's ears.

"My friend, you leave town tonight. And stay out. We hold Potts until noon of election day. If you have not returned at that time, the editor goes free. Otherwise—" Brock paused significantly. "Otherwise we make no promises."

Freezing barbs sank deep into Malozine's spine. He fought back an impulse toward blazing anger. He needed a cool, clear mind to handle this problem.

Hiram Potts was shaking his head, his eyes defiant. Malozine knew the editor was trying to translate to him a disregard for his own safety. But Malozine did not let his uncle's willingness to die in a crusader's cause affect his decision.

He boiled down the facts to two choices. He must either hit his hardware now, or ride out of Midnight. He had only the worthless promise of Blue John Brock and Ace Ujad that Hiram Potts would continue to live even though he obeyed their ultimatum and deserted the campaign. It was a long chance.

Again he weighed the odds. Four to one. And more gunwolves just outside the door. Too heavy. Reluctantly he rejected the idea of gunplay. With luck he might get two, possibly even three. Then the career of Augustus E. Malozine would end. While his uncle lived, there was hope. And there was no hope in him that he could get all four.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "you win, Brock."

The sheepman briskly rubbed his claws together. "That's right sensible. We won't detain you longer. You will want to be on your way."

Malozine backed to the door, slipped warily out of the office. The gaming tables held no lure for him now. He joined the outgoing stream and walked moodily to the shed behind Howard's quarters where he saddled his blue roan in silence.

He had a feeling that Ujad's men were watching as he reined into the street. But he did not particularly care. He spurred out of Midnight in a tawny river of dust. A desolate feeling of defeat rode with him as he guided the roan down a lonesome trail over the night-clad prairie.

ON election eve, a small, olive-skinned man in ragged sheepherder apparel trudged into Midnight from the dark prairie. A battered sombrero was jammed down over hair black as obsidian. A threadbare shirt smelling strongly of sheep dangled outside his patched trousers almost to his knees, and a soiled serape encased his shoulders. He looked one degree worse than the average Mexican sheepherder.

The smooth-faced, olive-skinned man turned a corner into the main street where he halted, blinked his grey eyes at the bright lights. His gaze wandered inevitably to the Red King. For the man in sheepherder attire was none other than Augustus E. Malozine.

As he wandered over the desert, a growing conviction had possessed him that Brock and Ujad entertained no intentions of ever freeing Hiram Potts, even though they might be successful in placing their candidate in the sheriff's chair. The editor knew too much to be allowed to live.

His appearance in Midnight would jeopardize what slim chance the editor might yet have to escape with his life. Yet Malozine could think of no way to find out without entering the town.

Chancing that afternoon upon a Mexican with his dogs and flock, Malozine had traded his cowpuncher garb for the dirty

rags, much to the delight of the man from south of the border. Bark juices had stained his skin a deep brown, and whisker dye from his saddlebag blackened his hair and eyebrows until he looked more Mexican than did the sheepherder himself.

His mustache had presented the knottiest problem. He considered its development his most signal achievement in life to date. He had nurtured it with all the care that a florist devotes to his orchids. Yet it marked him as unmistakable as a brand on a steer. He had moaned and groaned, but finally had lifted his razor.

He had thought the result a passable disguise. But now that he was within full view of the Midnight populace, grave doubts assailed him. What if he were recognized by one of Ujad's hoodlums? The only reply to that peril lay in the Colt .38's concealed beneath his low-hanging shirt-tails.

A handbill fluttered along the sidewalk in the clutches of the night breeze. A printed word hooked his attention. As the paper passed his sandaled feet, he reached down and snatched it.

He smoothed the crumpled sheet and read the glaring type:

HOWARD PRINTS LIES

CANDIDATE AND MANAGER COERCE EDITOR AT GUNPOINT!

Malozine read on, his eyes steeled to gray chips. A brief paragraph accused himself and Frank Howard of forcing the *Star* editor to print Howard-written copy in a special edition under threat of death. The name, "Hiram Potts," was printed below.

It was not difficult to guess who published that handbill, Malozine was thinking. Brock had chosen this method in a last-minute effort to destroy the special edition's vote-pulling power. Doubtless it would be successful, too, since no one except Malozine knew that Hiram Potts was Brock's prisoner.

Malozine shoved the handbill into a pocket and continued on down the street. As he neared Frank Howard's headquarters, he was amazed to see a crowd of angry-faced townsmen milling in front of the building. Baffled, he trudged on past, the denunciatory refrain of cries and curses ringing in his ears. He wondered that the handbill alone could stir the townsmen against Howard like maddened hornets. With the polls due to open tomorrow morning, Frank Howard's chances now appeared hopeless. Malozine gloomily pulled his sombrero down over his eyes.

Blue John Brock had outfoxed him. He had failed miserably in his role of campaign manager. He had lost the election.

A SLIM, tow-headed cowpuncher was standing on the sidewalk edge, eyeing the throng across the street in obvious disgust. He carried a Colt low-slung against his left thigh. Frank Howard had once introduced him as Lefty something-or-other from the Bar One. Malozine approached timidly.

"Mucho gringo troubles, señor," he ventured, adopting a lingo to match his disguise. "What for is thees beeg crowd so loco?"

The puncher turned cool blue eyes on Malozine. His nose wrinkled. The natural antipathy of any cowhand for a sheep nurse came strongly into his face. But he replied civilly enough.

"Gent name of Hiram Potts was bushwhacked last night. Not long after them lyin' handbills hit the streets. Up bobs a couple of Blue John Brock's woolies, swearin' they seen who the bushwhacker was when he made his getaway."

A current of cold rage swept Malozine. His worst fear was confirmed. "And thees whacker of the bush, señor?"

"The hombre who's been Howard's right hand man. Name of Malozine."

The rage within Malozine expanded to a consuming force. Brock's cunning brain had played his self-dealt hand to the limit.

"And thees crowd," he purred on, trying to draw more information. "They are mad with thees Malozeen hombre?"

Lofty let his cool eyes slant downward at Malozine with an intentness that propelled further doubts through the campaign manager as to the effectiveness of his disguise.

"Yeah. They swallered the woolies' yarn. They been lickerin' up all day. Now they're tryin' to smoke out Howard and make him tell where Malozine went to. If they ever ketch up with the hombre, they'll tear him to mincemeat."

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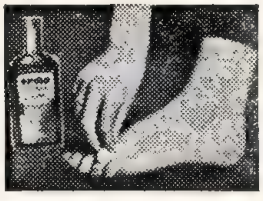

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Malozine slyly lifted an eyebrow and stroked his brown chin with brisk fingers.

"And you think thees Malozeen, he is the whacker of the bush, señor?"

"Hell, no," the cowpoke snapped. "More likely it's Blue John Brock or one of Ace Ujad's sidewinders. But what I think ain't helpin' Frank Howard's case any. Way she stacks up now, Joe Ott is our next sheriff. And there'll be sheep and dead men on Midnight range till hell won't hold 'em." With a curse of disgust, he turned and slouched away toward a corner saloon.

With a glance at the restless crowd, Malozine wheeled up the sidewalk toward the garish sign which was beckoning him once again, and for the last time, he was certain. The situation had become too precarious for further adroit moves. All along he had carried a conviction in the back of his head that he was going to have to launch a clean-up at the Red King.

A revelation to the public of Blue John Brock's connections with Ace Ujad would swing a big block of range votes to Howard. If only the Red King crowd and its evil influence could be wiped out, townsmen might come to their senses and support the candidate they knew was honest.

CHAPTER SIX

Elected By Gunsmoke

THE Red King was almost devoid of customers. Bargrease Smith and Vince Vogrich slouched at poker tables. Gamblers idled, waiting for victims to drift back from Howard's office. A few cowhands dotted the long bar. The barkeeper's familiar bald head bobbed in greeting.

"A mug of beer," Malozine said.

The barkeeper clutched Malozine's coin in payment as he dished out the drink. But he did not walk away. He kept staring at Malozine with those keen blue eyes. Malozine tried to look innocent. Finally the vendor reached out and tapped his arm.

"Don't get scared, sport," he whispered. "I don't talk in my sleep. Just figgered I'd warn you. You're a sight in that rig. But you won't fool Ujad."

Malozine warily slouched over the bar, murmuring out of the corner of his mouth. "Thanks. I don't intend to."

Understanding came into the barkeeper's

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eyes. "If you feel like starting a shindig, there won't be no danger of a charge in the back from the bar shotgun. I liked the way you handled yourself when you tangled with the Boomer. It's a pleasure to know a man who's full of brass and a good sport besides. Ace is in the office."

A glow of warmth spread over Malozine. It was nice to know he had one friend among the Red King brigade, even if a non-combatant.

The office door opened, and Sap Donavan came striding out past the bar. The carrot-haired gunman was about Malozine's size. His face was screwed into an ugly sneer that apparently was permanent. He swerved parallel with the rail, passing within a yard of the drinking campaigner.

Abruptly he halted, his red eyes squinted and staring. His right hand dropped ominously to his gun butt. He started to blurt a curse. At that instant, Malozine's doubled fist looped up from the bar.

The blow exploded squarely on the pugnacious point of Sap Donavan's jaw. The gunman's head snapped back. His knees hinged, and he crumpled face downward on the floor.

Malozine stared, almost as surprised as the gunman. He had actually won a battle with his fists. Of course Sap Donavan hadn't expected a punch. He hadn't even raised his guard. But you couldn't be too technical about such matters. Malozine turned back to his beer, his ego inflated to a dangerous degree. One-punch Malozine. That was him. Hell's doors had better be wide open, for there was going to be a rapid influx from the town of Midnight this election eve.

Suddenly he noted the ugly looks directed at him by Bargrease Smith and Vince Vogrich. They were on their feet, lumbering toward the bar. Their hairy paws dangled above black gunbutts. Even the gamblers had stiffened to an imminent alertness. All eyes converged on the bar, and a thin, brittle tension stretched over the room.

MALOZINE heard someone enter the main door. He saw Vogrich's eyes bulge. Somebody along the bar yelped a nervous greeting. And then the two newcomers were trudging within Malozine's vision.

Amazement almost floored him as he saw that one of them was Frank Howard, his face stern, a double set of hardware encasing his sturdy hips. The gent siding Howard proved to be the cowpoke called Lefty.

"There he is," Lefty declared, indicating Malozine. "Lucky I spotted him through that sheepherder rig. Then wangled you out of your office through the basement window while the mob bellowed in front, eh, Frank?"

Howard's eyes didn't leave the threatening gunmen. "Looks like the round-up has commenced, with Señor Malozine the ramrod. Sap Donavan down and the house to go. Lay you a frogskin, Lefty, that my manager comes out high man."

It came to Malozine that the sharp-eyed Lefty had watched him enter the Red King and had divined his purpose. Informed of Malozine's return, Frank Howard, too, must have realized their sole remaining hope lay in smashing the Brock-Ujad ring right here at headquarters.

Howard's voice roared out harshly at the dark-browed gunmen. "What for are you two warthogs bristled up? Go on back and lay down."

Bargrease Smith scowled like a thundercloud. Vogrich rumbled an ugly curse. The faro dealer scuttled silently for a corner. Malozine swung back his shirt tails for a speedier approach to his guns.

Bargrease warned ominously, "Lay off your tongue, Howard. We're throwin' that stinkin' sheepherder out on his hind end."

"You'll heave me out first," Howard snapped.

Gunsteel flashed under the Red King's glaring lights. Malozine's hands swept the shirt tails aside, ripped up filled with guns. Vogrich's gun snarled. The slug splintered the bar at his elbow.

Howard's weapon was booming as Bargrease Smith opened up. Smith lurched back, firing wildly. Malozine drove a slug at Vince Vogrich, missed and fired again as the gunman hurled himself behind an overturned table.

A howl of pain and rage erupted from Vogrich's throat. From the back of the room, derringers and small-caliber revolvers began to yap as gamblers brought hide-

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outs into action. Gunsmoke filled the saloon.

Lefty cursed, slapped a hand to his side. He wavered, but did not fall. With set teeth, he blazed again, and a marble-faced gambler pitched headlong.

The booming thunder of .38's and .45's rang along the bar. The other cowhands were joining the battle at Howard's side, picking out targets among the collection of dealers and croupiers who were scurrying about like rats, shooting viciously as they dived behind tables.

The bellow of a shotgun filled Malozine's ears, and a lamp suddenly blinked out. Bits of glass showered the room. Another blast. And another lamp out. The thoughtful barkeeper was methodically shooting out the lights.

Despite the wild swarm of lead buzzing about him and thudding into the wall behind, Malozine was holding his fire. Deciding that Howard and the cowhands could control the house, he vaulted over the bar.

"Play out the string, Frank!" he yelled over his shoulder as he sprinted toward the office door.

The panel swung wide, almost in his face. Ace Ujad appeared in the opening, a pistol in his hand, his black eyes flickering with a reptilian intensity. As he spotted Malozine, he swung up the pistol.

"You damned meddler," he snarled. "You're back again. By the gods, I'll—"

Malozine shot forward from the toes. It was a chance to take Ace Ujad alive, to make him admit he and Brock had murdered Hiram Potts. Malozine's gun barrel chopped down on Ujad's wrist. At the same instant, his lowered head hit the gambler in the stomach like a sledge.

Both men piled through the doorway and crashed down in a tangled heap. The gambler's gun exploded as it struck the floor. Shouts of alarm sounded from within the office room. Malozine rocked to his knees. Ujad was cursing and fighting like a lynx. Malozine rapped his skull a solid blow with a gun barrel, and the struggles ceased abruptly.

AWARE of his peril, Malozine dived from the doorway. As he slid along the wall toward the protection of an over-

stuffed chair, a gun coughed loudly. Once, twice. A searing stream of pain flowed through his shoulder. He was knocked back against the wall, dizzy and shaken.

The gun blared again, and his leg flopped numbly from beneath him. He focused his eyes on the porcine torso of Hognose Wilster who was crouched across the room, his weapon a spitting torch of flame.

Malozine fired three times. He couldn't miss such a wide target. Hognose Wilster crumpled to the carpet, uttering his last earthly grunt.

Blue John Brock's cold voice bored through the echoes. "Malozine, you're one hombre who is hell bent. And here's your ticket. Right to the gates!"

Through a red haze of pain, Malozine discerned the long-beaked sheepman squinting along the barrel of a sixgun held above the desk edge. His knees abruptly buckled, and he slid down in a heap. As he was falling, Brock's bullet slashed through his hair and pounded the wall behind him.

Blue John Brock cursed, aimed again. His right hand gun empty, Malozine pulled up his left with an effort that flared a sheet of flame through his shoulder. He aimed quickly at a point between Blue John Brock's glittering eyes.

As he triggered, a tremendous force blasted him backward. Scarlet splinters of shock screamed along his nerves, converged in his brain to form a spinning black orbit. He knew he was wavering on the verge of unconsciousness.

Dimly, through the rippling smoke layers, he could see Blue John Brock sprawled on the floor, his heels drumming the boards in a dying convulsion.

Clouds thicker than the powdersmoke seemed to be rolling through the doorway. The shooting from the barroom had ceased. Loud yells and the thump of boots mingled with a snapping crackling sound. An eerie red glow spread into the office from the dark doorway. Fresh alarm knifed through the daze in Malozine's brain.

A succession of events pounded through his mind. The barkeeper shooting out the lights. Spilled oil. Ignited. The place in flames. He had to move fast.

The effort cost him what little strength remained in his body. Blackness zoomed

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into his brain. He knew he was falling again. Falling into a feathery black gulf. . . .

WHEN Malozine opened his eyes, he was stretched on a cot in a quiet room. A desk lamp sent shadows dancing in the corners. Frank Howard swiveled about in his chair, looking cheerful.

"Awake? Attaboy. The sawbones said you'd come around in about twenty-four hours."

"The fire," Malozine said, remembering.

"Burned the Red King to the sod. I got to you just in time to tote you out. The cowhands got Lefty out okay. He was hard hit, but he'll be swingin' a lariat southpaw style again one of these days. I reckon Ace Ujad got plumb burnt up, though. Him and all the dead gunwolves.

"Oh, yes, and Sap Donavan came to just in time to run outside with his shirt tail on fire. He's in the jug now. Knowing he's in a jam and no Brock or Ujad to help him, he told the whole story about Hiram Potts' murder. Swore Ace Ujad killed Potts. And Brock hired his sheep nurses to testify you did it. We made the sheephands sing, too. And Suds, the barkeep, told us Brock and Ujad were partners all along, each owning half the Red King."

Malozine suddenly recalled the election was over.

"Who won?" he asked. "You or Joe Ott?"

"Neither."

Malozine was puzzled. "What the heck? Did it end in a tie? Or didn't anybody vote?"

Frank Howard grinned broadly. "The new sheriff, I'm happy to say, is none other than Augustus E. Malozine!"

Malozine stared.

Howard's tone was sincere. "It's gospel truth. When people learned who cleaned up the Red King and smoked Blue John Brock's schemes into the open, they were all for Malozine."

Malozine let the words roll around in his mind. It seemed anything could happen in Midnight. Finally he observed, with a grin, "Reckon I'm the first yahoo ever elected sheriff while unconscious."

Frank Howard laughed. "Shucks, you make a better campaign that way."

THE END

(Continued from page 73)

tainly, said Ramon, he knew of the Frenchman's silver. Had not his uncle, Jesus Moreno, who now lived at San Pasqual, worked for Senor Pedro in all the time that he was prospecting?

At San Pasqual they found Moreno, the same sad-eyed man who had appeared with Hausenberger at San Diego on that day in 1854. The old man was willing to help, but skeptical of their success. "I can take you to every camp that Pedro made on his last trip," he said, "but I cannot tell you where the mine is, for I do not know. Pedro had the habit of carrying much ore around with him at all times, and therefore I never knew when he had found something and when he had not."

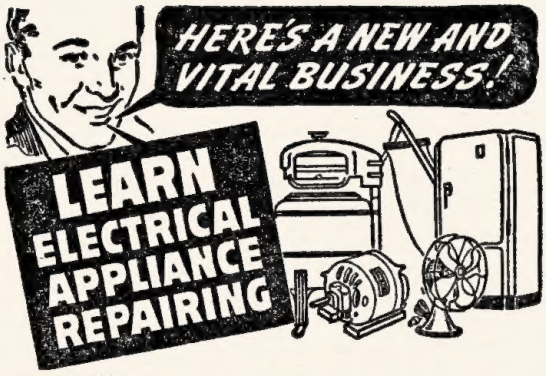
Meacham and Campbell searched for weeks, struggling through the tortured wilderness of mesas, canyons and arroyos. Finding no trace around the camp where Hausenberger had announced his discovery, they tried others. It was man-killing work, and always the result was the same: failure. At last, in disgust, they gave up.

Moreno, sad-eyed as ever, went back cheerfully enough to San Pasqual—with his pockets full of gringo yellowbacks.

One enterprising citizen put up a standing offer of five-hundred thousand dollars for the mine, but no one found so much as an additional clue to its whereabouts—until the story of El Cajon began to be whispered in the desert.

The story went that an Indian lived on El Cajon Mountain, near the Barona Ranch, had found a rich lode of silver. By the time he had made two or three trips to Los Angeles with a burro-load of silver, many gentlemen were laying plans to find out where the mine was. But by then it was too late. Coming back from his third trip, the Indian drank too much whisky, got into a quarrel with three Mexicans, and was stabbed to death.

Charles Knowles, one of the most indefatigable lost-mine hunters in the Southwest, took a partner and went looking on El Cajon. They found the ruin of an adobe hut, and, probing in the walls with a pick-ax, unearthed three "kidneys" of almost-pure silver, one as large as a coconut. They had apparently been cached by the Indian, who died before he could sell them. They



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also found where the Indian had smelted his ore, but as to the mine, where was it? Only Hausenberger and the Indian had known, and they were dead.

Knowles quit for the time being and waited for another lead. Several years later, he got it. Riding up toward El Cajon, he met a Mexican coming down. The Mexican showed him some rich ore samples and asked where he could have them assayed.

Concealing his excitement, Knowles said, "I'll assay it for you. Where'd you find it?"

"Up on El Cajon," said the Mexican, waving vaguely.

Knowles took him to John McKinnon's blacksmith shop, where he heated a lump of ore in the forge, then plunged it into a bucket of water. The rock "sweated" nodules of silver the size of buttons. It was the Lost Frenchman, all right. "How did you happen to find it?" Knowles demanded.

"My grandfather was Jesus Moreno, who worked for Señor Pedro," the Mexican explained. "My family have always known where the mine is."

Knowles thought briefly of Meacham's and Campbell's chagrin if they could have heard that. "You'll need backing," he said. "How about a partnership, fifty-fifty?"

The Mexican was agreeable, but said he would have to wait two weeks, until he had concluded a deal with the local butcher. Knowles was curious and impatient, but he agreed to wait.

The two weeks went by, then another. Alarmed, Knowles went to see the butcher.

"That dirty son of a gun!" the butcher exploded, when asked about the Mexican. "I gave him seven hundred dollars to buy cattle in Mexico, and he ran off with it!"

And neither Knowles nor the butcher ever saw the grandson of Moreno again.

Three men knew where the Lost Frenchman is—Hausenberger, the Indian, and the Mexican. Of these, two certainly died shortly after they found it, and probably the third as well. But the story is not finished yet. Somewhere in the tumbled, treacherous desert, Pierre Hausenberger's lost mine still lies—waiting to add still other hopeful treasure-seekers to the list.

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